

# WALKABOUT



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*Charles & Elsa Chăuvel*



W. H. ALLEN  
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*The authors thank all those organisations and fellow travellers  
who have kindly co-operated by providing photographs*

**WE DEDICATE THIS BOOK**

to the many people who have followed our travels and have invited us to "boil the billy" with them at their own firesides—and to the memory of Harry, who crossed so many gullies with us, and since the writing of this book has crossed the last.

## Foreword

THE history of the great land mass of Australia is lost in unrecorded time: the history of the Australia we know is only 170 years old.

Both Elsa and I have lived for one third of all that wonderful time. That might make us seem old but the country is young and we started making our Australian films when we were youngsters, and there is no such thing as age in a land which presents a challenge to your living while you have the spirit and the strength to meet that challenge. For thirty years we have been together as a film-producing team, and it seems right that we should now be writing our first travel book together.

For four long years we have literally followed in the footsteps of the Stone Age men and women with our cameras as we filmed T.V. travels and our screen play *Jedda*, which was Australia's first feature film to be made in colour in the outback. On the northern flood plains of our country we have heard the drone of a thousand buffalo hoofs; on hidden rivers the dip of the paddles as we moved with strange aborigine peoples in their dug-out canoes; the horsebells as we moved with the droves of cattle, or the mournful howl of the dingoes as our camp fires burned low.

As motion-picture makers we have never known monotony. Swift transition has moved us from our sleeping places on the dried bogs of the Northern Territory flood plains to the comfort of room 712 of New York's Waldorf Astoria—or from the still, frail waters below the red sandhills of Australia's centre, in which we swam, to the long rollers that swept us in to the sophisticated sands of Waikiki.

We have known what it was one month to be sleeping under our square mosquito nets in the silence of an Australian desert and then within a few weeks to be battling to find sleep against the noise of the oncoming New York traffic, our ears stopped with the rubber plugs provided by our hotel and our eyes shaded with black masks to

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induce sleep. At times like these naturally our minds went back to the peace of the Australian billabongs, when the only sound was the drip of the dew and a slight sigh of wind high up in the tops of the coolibah trees. These things have been the living symbols of our escape. These are the changes that our work and life have swung upon us to keep us young.

This is the life we want to bring to you.

When in London to put the finishing touches to *Jedda*, we were approached by the B.B.C. to appear on television with excerpts from this adventurous film. This we did on the night before we left to return to Australia. Months later we flew back to London, this time to write a motion-picture script for Warwick Films. Then we heard that our half-hour on the B.B.C. had received a good rating, and when we left again for Australia we were under contract to the B.B.C. to take our cameras right across our continent from the Great Divide to Port Augusta, and from Port Augusta to the strange lands away in the north that lie down beside the Arafura Sea.

Such a trip had never been undertaken with cameras before and it would be impossible for us, just in one book, to introduce the reader to all the places and peoples, and all the bizarre adventure that was ours over four years as we filmed *Jedda* and then the thirteen half-hour travel features for the B.B.C.

There is just one slight deviation in our book, and that is at Marrakai. In our chapter *The Mighty Men of Marrakai* our introduction to this homestead in the buffalo lands is from our first filming at Marrakai for *Jedda*, and our flight to Marrakai in the teeth of the monsoon depicts the last days of our television adventure. Both together give a more complete picture of the world's greatest buffalo station. Into the Flying Doctor session, spent with Mrs. Boundary, we have interpolated other conversations, to paint the true, broad picture of the linking of this land by radio.

We want you to feel when you have read this book that you have been through Australia's outback and that you have met some of its most interesting people. We want to bring you face to face with eternal distance and to have you witness that dramatic cleavage of the seasons from THE WET to THE DRY which goes on ceaselessly, changing the face of the great north land each year from harshness to beauty—



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draining everything from the land with heat and scorching winds and giving everything back to it again with heavy rains and flooding rivers.

If from the pages of our book you can gain the meaning of simple things and simple truths and find in them some comfort and strength, then our journeys together will have been worth while.

We feel that we can talk to you about these things because our life has constantly whisked us from the good to the bad, from extreme comfort to extreme discomfort; from moments of fear to moments when we have seen and been guided by the great courage of others; from moments of strain to moments of divine rest and contentment. When in the city we, like you, have read the terrible newspaper headlines, morning after morning—those frightful lines of fear and hate, or impending crisis and the doom of the world. But then we have left it all to lie in the blankets of a comfortable swag with almost a thousand miles of wilderness on either side of our quietly flickering camp fire, and only the sound of the gently tapping wood sticks and the prayers of the Stone Age man coming to us from his bark gunyah. In the morning when the birds sang, his children would romp and play on the side of the still pool which reflected the red sandhills and the beauty of the snow-white ghost gums. At these times the doom of the world seemed far away.

Perhaps you can share with us the priceless hours of freedom in a land without artifice. You will have heard the rippling laughter that comes from happy hearts even when the sun beats down and there is nothing between it and the earth but red dust and searing haze.

When we have lost our way in the city we have found it sometimes in the land where no roads cross or signposts stand.

Cecil Madden of the B.B.C. wanted a true and faithful recording of the country and the people of our continent, right from one of our large capital cities westwards through the vast lands that have fallen to Australia's lot to develop and populate.

Through the years we have spent filming dramatic screen plays in Australia we have always wanted to film our country factually. Now we have done so and we hope that the reader will learn to boil the billy and enjoy these long journeys with us.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *On With Our Swags*

<sup>2</sup>STILL high in the night sky, our plane banked over Sydney—a world of multi-coloured lights moving in beautiful patterns below us. There was no end to this splendour as it spread from the great broken headlands on the ocean front, along the Bondi and Coogee beaches, with the solid chunk of city in the background. Lights and slight, drifting mists as far as the eye could see—right to Parramatta and the darkness which held the great walls of the Dividing Range. Our plane straightened and cut speed as the pattern of jewels came rushing to meet us. An American couple turned to Elsa and me, exclaiming, "Say, that's real fine! We never knew you had a city like this!" Then we touched down and taxied in.

Our daughter Suzanne and our unit manager, Harry Closter, were at Sydney airport to meet us. It was good to be with Suzanne again, and for her to be with us, because life and our work with its constant journeys by aeroplanes, ships and trains, and even by horseback parts us so often. Now we would only be together again for three weeks.

"What is this business about going back into the centre of Australia?" Suzanne asked. "Haven't you both had enough?"

Then Harry came bustling through the milling people from the back of the Customs room; long, lean, excitable Harry.

While our luggage came through the Customs, Harry brought us up to date. "Your cable was great news, and I haven't wasted any time. We should be heading for the outback in three weeks' time."

"Well, this is February," I replied, "So we'll have to hurry. By the end of this month we should be at Broken Hill or Port Augusta, and by the middle of April we should be living underground on the Coober Pedy Opal Field. That's the way we've got to move. We're committed to take our cameras across the whole breadth of Australia."

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We motored from the airfield, which carries the name "Sir Kingsford Smith" after the Australian who was the first man to fly across the mighty Pacific. We entered our industrial district and red and green lights flashing in the sky showed planes coming in from everywhere—New Zealand, Africa, America, England, India, Japan, Hong Kong, New Guinea and from Darwin and all points of the continent.

The strong odour from the Botany tanneries which lie beyond the airfield reminded us that we were back in a land of cattle. Shame upon us, that we Australians should usher our visitors by planes from overseas through the tanning smells near Botany Bay. Some people feel the name "Botany" should be dropped because it is reminiscent of convicts, but this land is too big for that quality of thinking.

The effect of the convict and his avaricious overlords left its mark upon the first fifty years of the Colony's growth, but from that point and even before the great land booms which followed the conquering of the Great Dividing Range which had hemmed the colony in, the mark of the convict was being erased. Then the discovery of vast grass lands and later the gold rushes brought tides of new settlers, and today more than a million immigrants from all parts of Europe have crowded in here since the Second World War. Nobody will condone the system and methods of punishment of one hundred and sixty years ago—especially the system which placed a man in irons and exiled him for stealing a loaf of bread when he was starving, or for hiding away the heirloom that was Aunt Emily's brooch when the bailiffs were on their way. But I believe that the colonising of remote Australia over its first twenty years of suffering and starvation is the greatest story of human endeavour the world has ever known. That we should have honoured some convicts by giving their names to Sydney's districts and buildings is a sign that we are not so small a people as to be dwarfed for ever by the bigness of our country.

We passed from Botany to the maze of streets and traffic arteries, which in themselves mix the colour of the history of England and Australia as it was in that period of wars and colonial growth between the years 1788 to 1850. Districts and streets are given over to statesmen and to great battles. We passed through the districts of Beaconsfield and Alexandria, and to our right was Rosebery. We crossed Bourke Street to enter the districts of Zetland and Waterloo. We crossed Wellington

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Street and soon on our left was the district of Redfern, named after a convict who became a famous surgeon.

We outspanned the city with its main streets—George and Pitt and Castlereagh, Elizabeth and Philip—kings and queens and statesmen all sharing streets which just a hundred years ago were muddy roads with bullocks pulling drays and carts. We crossed Cleveland, Rutland and Bedford—then Wentworth and William and Wilberforce.

Our home was in the harbour suburb of Vaucluse in a peaceful little street, eight miles from the centre of Sydney, with its two million people.

Our cottage looks out to the blue harbour across Parsley Bay and to the Bottle and Glass Rocks; across a tremendous expanse of waters to the high wooded headlands of George's Heights and the brilliant crescent of lights which mark the playground of Manly Cove, away in the distance. The majestic headlands at the opening to the harbour from the Pacific Ocean stand in the right-hand corner of our view. All ships come through that rocky gateway and stop for a while upon the waters below our home to let the pilot off.

On nights like the one upon which we returned, the steamers—whether they be large or small, like the *Orsova* from England, or the *Monterey* from America, the *Tahitian* from France, the *Mikasa Maru* from Japan, the *Stratt Lambok* from Africa, the *Thorstrand* from Singapore or the *Tomoryclus* from the Persian gulf—all come, each like a palace of jewels, to stay awhile in dazzling reflection upon the waters below our home.

On still nights we fall asleep to the sound of a nearby heavy tolling bell as it idly swings and rings from side to side with the rise and fall of the ocean swells. We hear the sound of anchor chains running out and the ship bells, or the bugle sounding from some destroyer.

We had been in London for five weeks and it had only taken us four days to fly home. So little had changed, and many of the plants we had carefully tended before our leaving were now in bloom.

On Sunday, our first day at home, I found Elsa looking down at a number of young plants which would not bloom until we had crossed the Great Divide and were perhaps well out towards the Australian

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deserts. I sensed a sadness in the way she looked at the work we had both, with Suzanne, put into the garden, and the way she looked out at the sparkling harbour on this champagne summer's day—a picture of hundreds of snow-white sails, all bending before the wind. I took her arm and we strolled to the corner of the garden. We had spent three long seasons in the outback of Australia and she could read my thoughts. "No Charles, I wouldn't miss doing what we have planned to do for all the world. We've been given the heaven-sent opportunity to be factual at last after years of roughing it out in those places to bring fiction to the screen. This is our opportunity to show everything we can about Australia in all truthfulness to millions of people who know little about our country."

She laughed as she turned to me. "You know it's more than a year since we camped under the stars—four months back home after we finished *Jedda* in London, and now this time away in England again, and Sue wants to go away to Queensland for a long sketching trip—she's planned it for a long time and this will be the best time for her to do it."

This day was the one and only day we had as a threesome to plan the very personal, domestic and sentimental things about our home and ourselves—the basic pattern upon which the success of all one's work depends.

Monday, and our world started to spin. We had to set up technical services in Sydney for the classifying and editing of all our film as it came back and was processed, from the many outposts in the far-away places of Australia. Bulldozers were at this moment clearing the ground for the first television station and studio, and others who had been established for years in the production of motion pictures were making plans to adapt themselves to the new medium. But actually three television stations were to be built in both Sydney and Melbourne, and many of Australia's largest industrial enterprises were beginning to manufacture receiving sets.

Existing studios were tumbling over themselves to secure staff, and large salaries were being paid to the limited number of experienced technicians—particularly editors. With the shortage of experienced cameramen, we would have to break in new cameramen under our contract as we travelled. It was essential that Elsa and I be photographed

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in action, and the fact that we had undertaken to share the experiences of those people with whom we would live in the outback made it imperative that we always had one good cameraman with us, and at times owing to the nature of the subjects, an extra cameraman or two would be necessary.

So our home became the haunt of young cameramen, discussing the new medium and the nature of the work we were undertaking. Drivers were needed for our Land Rovers and each driver would have to learn how to handle a camera. There would be times when all cameras would have to come into action at once and each member of the unit must be strong and resourceful and not afraid to rough it.

It was fine weather and our back lawn became the depot and main point of assembly, while the front verandah was given over to cameras and sound-recording equipment and the testing of the Flying Doctor radio transmitting set. This special transmitter was to keep us in touch with the outside world at all times. It was essential that all this packing be done at our home, so that everything could be checked and double checked, right from the proverbial needle to the dynamo to charge our batteries, or to the winch to be fitted to the front of our vehicles to pull us from bogs or from the beds of broken gullies.

Series of heavy-duty batteries were fitted into a small trailer which acted as a small power-house and brackets of "short lifer" studio lamps were packed in special boxes to enable us to, if necessary, light caves in the mountains, and the interiors of dug-outs on the opal field, and homesteads and native camps at night. Special aluminium and silver-papered reflectors were made and long perfectly fitted pine boxes were specially designed to keep things cool and to keep out the fine dust. These were carried into Elsa's domain for the careful packing of our tucker box and medical kit.

Children draped themselves over the garden fence. "Bring me back a little baby buffalo will yer, Mr. Chauvel?" called young Munro.

The guns we packed excited them. They might never be used as they were there for emergency only, in case we were lost or stranded with vehicle trouble, and would have to live off the land.

When dependent upon the land, tribal aborigines would do the hunting for us

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On our first days of packing, I made the first notes in my diary. Charles had relegated this duty to me so that a complete record of facts would be available.

I checked and re-checked my lists. Where we were going there would be no little shop around the corner. Sometimes we'd be more than one hundred miles from some isolated store, or the nearest point a travelling hawker could visit. In food, the most important items were flour, tea, sugar, powdered milk, tinned butter and honey. I ticked off tins of canned vegetables and fruits and cheese. These were our basic foodstuffs upon which we depended when far away from the sheep or cattle stations, or without aborigine hunters. Except for the butter and our powdered milk and fruits, we only used our tinned foods when we had no opportunity to have fresh foods from the stations or from the hunting aborigines.

Our menus of fresh foods were very varied at times—wild pig, fresh fish from the rivers and billabongs, and kangaroo steaks, and turtle and mussels, and wild honey. When the aborigines were hunting, and when with the buffalo hunters, we enjoyed buffalo steaks and tongues.

One of our most important items was coarse salt, which we carried in two large sacks to salt down beef whenever we could secure it from the stations or the butchers in the small outpost towns. Owing to the humidity of the far Northern Territory, which drains the natural salts from one's system by excessive perspiration we had to take a good supply of salt tablets to take with our meals. Vitamin tablets were also essential. Our Flying Doctor medical kit was really a regulation medical chest, which each outpost, whether it is a cattle station or just a well-sinker's camp, has to have as part of its essential equipment. It contained drugs in numbered bottles and a carefully chosen assortment of first-aid equipment. With the chest went a book of instructions containing figured diagrams of the human body, which the patient or those attending use for assistance when describing over the air to the doctor the exact situation of any point of pain or discomfort. It explains also how to report symptoms by radio, to enable the doctor to make his diagnosis.

This medical chest had a special get-at-able place in one of our Land-Rovers, but there was one article which I always carried in the



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pocket of my skirt or shirt. It was a little cylinder about three inches long, but vital for snake bite. At one end of the cylinder was a sharp stiletto-like blade. This was to swiftly open the flesh where the snake had bitten. The other end contained permanganate of potash, which was to be rubbed thickly into the cut. Although this may sound a bit menacing, I must confess that in all my thirty years of bush wandering with Charles, I have only seen about four venomous snakes.

To conserve space we carried a series of billy cans, graded in size, and fitting into each other. This gave me about six utensils for tea, hot water or for boiling vegetables. The round iron Bedourie oven was next in importance. This was for roasting and baking in the hot coals of the camp fire; then the small, folding iron stretchers, so made that we could fold and carry them under our arms, and our tough oblong mosquito nets.

Charles swung past my table with a huge swag balanced on his shoulder. The swag and the billy-can are perhaps the two most Australian objects in existence, in the outback. A swag is the bushman's portmanteau, and to many bushmen it is literally their home, as for months on end they carry their bedding and everything they possess—sometimes even a one-man tent—wrapped in a cunning fashion within this tough six-foot strip of canvas.

Suitcases and even tough leather travelling cases soon get smashed in the rough hurly-burly of going outback; and swags are comfortable things to sit on and lean against, when travelling in trucks, and when unrolled on the ground and opened out, one's carefully made up bed is ready to slide into.

Light, comfortable foam-rubber mattresses and pillows formed the base of our swags. Into the overlapping sides we stitched compartments in which we kept one change of clothing and sleeping attire, and bits and pieces of toilet things, sewing kit, writing pads, personal letters, long green oblong mosquito nets, small bottles of mosquito repellent and small electric torches.

I always like to keep a torch in the pocket compartment closest to my hand—it's a comfort in the bush at night when you hear an ominous rustle close to your sleeping place. For all my years of bush camping, I am still childishly nervous of the dark.

Of course we had a large trunk or suitcase each, packed away in

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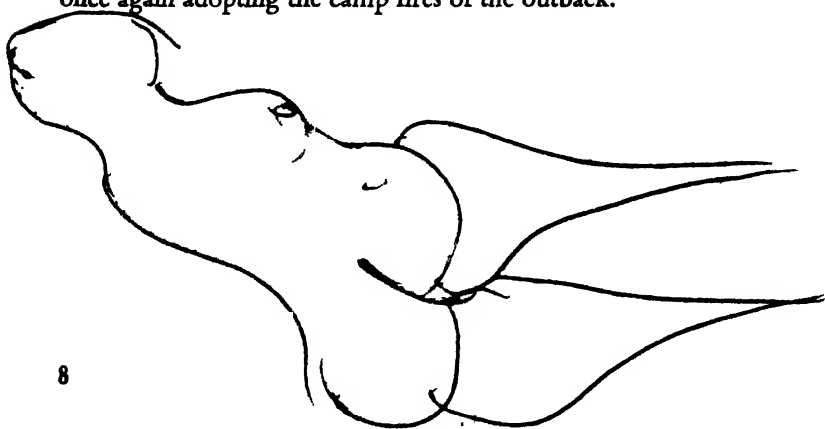
one of the trucks with extra clothes, but for every day ease and comfort when travelling and camping, the swag takes pride of place.

I was happy to see my commissariat department moving into place in one of our trucks and all our swags packed, as I had promised to spend one of my last afternoons out sailing on the harbour with some old friends. I wanted to feel that salty bite of the spray on my face and to feast my eyes on the deep blue of the harbour, and the beautiful homes and gardens that cascade down the hillsides to meet the curl of small beaches.

I wanted a last impression of all this before we turned our vehicles towards the Great Divide—the wonder world of Australia—and away from people and clustering homes to the lonely red plains in the centre of our continent.

On my last afternoon I did some last-minute shopping. I lunched with Charles in King Street, the "oyster lane" of Sydney, where those who like oysters have enjoyed the most choice examples of this delicious shellfish for over a hundred years—among them Nellie Stewart and Robert Louis Stevenson. Then I visited a small milliner's shop to leave an idea for a new hat to welcome my return from the outback. Something to shade the carpet of freckles with which I knew I would return.

Suzanne had already left on her sketching trip to Queensland, and we had let our home, so I visited the beautiful flower-stalls in Martin Place for blooms of wild flannel flowers to brighten our cottage for the people who would take over. Then home to prepare our last dinner in a real kitchen, with shining pots and pans and glass saucepans, before once again adopting the camp fires of the outback.



## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Great Divide*

WE made our first camp in the Blue Mountains. For twenty long years this blue range of mountains—a series of tangling cordilleras somehow all wrapped into one bastion—held the little settlement of Sydney town to the harbour, and its settlers to a narrow strip of land between the ocean and the range. Those first twenty years are the most amazing years in the life of any country. Farms grew along the rivers that cut their way through from the mountain masses; escaped prisoners lived with the wandering tribes of aborigines and brought amazing tales of immense, hidden, sunken valleys of blue, with beautiful waters and the strangest animals.

A handful of Merino sheep from King George III's private stud at Kew grew such fine wool so quickly as to cause a sensation in the wool marts of Europe, and in a few years colonial wool superseded all other wools in England, and with the dwindling of England's flocks the rush to grow wool in Australia was almost as great then as the rush later to the goldfields.

But the Blue Mountains hemmed them in until three free settlers, Lawson, Wentworth and Blaxland, found a track through to endless grasslands beyond. This started a surge westward by the land-hungry, and new openings in the great range were found over mighty rivers to the north. But little did those early settlers realise that these blue mountains, which lay just beyond Sydney, were just an insignificantly small portion of a great backbone of tangled ranges.

This great range runs for just on three thousand miles down the whole of the eastern coast of Australia, and by its cleavage of the eastern and western rivers and of the rains of the equinox, divides the fertile east coast from the semi-arid inland.

Hence its name—the Great Divide.

It is one of the most amazing mountain ranges in the world, and like

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Australia, it contradicts itself at every height and bend of its tortuous length. At no point is it higher than a little more than seven thousand feet, with some of its most frightening mountain peaks only rising to four or five thousand feet. In the north it is clothed in dense tropical jungle—in the south it has regions of snow larger than Switzerland. It does extraordinary things with the weather and the rains. It builds the summer storms and sends them on their way. Its long valleys and canyons trap the winds. In many sections it gives and holds back the rains, contributing to the vagaries of the seasons, as the cattlemen and farmers can tell.

Most people throughout the world picture Australia as a great arid land mass. The truth is that Australia possesses in its eastern coast and in its lands along the Great Divide one of the largest and most fertile strips in the world, and some of the highest rainfalls. Two thousand miles at least of high rain forests, and valley upon valley of tumbling rivers and waterfalls, and some of the richest plateaux in the world.

It is a scientific and archaeological belief that Australia is the oldest land mass in the world. Today we have determined the Azoic and Proterozoic eras and these take us back 1,400,000,000 years. Somewhere no doubt within the Azoic age, the stupendous upsurge of the Australian land mass took place. Its birth was a continual alluviation of land and sea, of the growth and destruction of immense mountain ranges and the appearance of inland seas, culminating in the change from the age of ice to the slow erosion of the mighty ranges and the coming of heat to the land. It has been proven that the granite rocks which give foundation to Australia are definitely of the Azoic Age and that some of the higher ground of our central mountains has never been touched by the sea.

One of the most interesting facts about Australia is that many of our animals and trees and ferns can only be found in other parts of the world as fossils—while in Australia they are living things. The wonderland of the Great Divide is the natural sanctuary of the oldest animals in the world. As a youngster I can remember looking up from the pools with the platypus to the crumbling lava walls of the great range, with a feeling of reverence towards the eerie mountain scarps, which in age and retrospect have an almost sacred significance.

"That's the Great Divide," my father would say, as he pointed out

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the line of bold mountain peaks which run the length of our beautiful valley in Queensland.

Everywhere about its mountain peaks and sun-drenched valleys there is an air of antiquity—especially in the mountain-locked gullies with their giant tree ferns and cyads, and upon some of the moss and fungus-coated plateaux, which stand perpetually in the mists. Upon these plateaux are isolated stands of Antarctic beech trees dating back to the Ice Age, forests that are crumbling and hoary with age.

But perhaps the greatest wonder of all is the way the Great Dividing Range catches the heavy falls of winter rains and summer storms and stores these waters in the world's most amazing underground reservoir. For great distances below the western slopes of the range there are porous sandstone beds through which the rains soak, and into which drain many of the smaller streams. These sandstone shelves extend for hundreds of miles towards the interior where the vast underground Artesian Basin exists. From this storage the people of the very arid lands of much of the interior receive their water.

Now there are mammoth schemes, costing hundreds of millions of pounds, to dam some of the best waters of the Divide, lift some of the streams that flow eastward into the sea, and by tunnelling them through the tops of the ranges to divert them to rivers on the western side. But even without the expenditure of millions of pounds water which naturally falls in storms upon an area of beautiful mountain peaks in a district of the Divide where I was born, finds its way down the Condamine and Darling Rivers for more than two thousand miles to be carried then for another three hundred miles by pipelines into the deserts of South Australia.

To capture something of the meaning of the great range, we had to move our cameras quickly to many different sections and contract with cameramen to film many different scenes. We made our first camp about eighty miles out from Sydney. As we rolled down the grassy slopes towards a cascading creek, we approached a patch of scrub with river gum trees. Here the sound of a host of fairy bells filled the air—they rang from every tree top.

This is one of the most unforgettable sounds of our Australian bush—the sound of the tinkling bell-birds. It is difficult to imagine this sound being made by birds as it seems to come from a thousand beautiful

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silver bells. As we passed quite close to the unseen colony the sound was almost deafening.

We were lucky, because bell-birds are not to be met with every day; sometimes one can travel for many hours through the scrub lands of the Divide and not hear one at all. They are generally deep down in green jungle-clad gullies or in haunts along the sunlit fronts of the mountain jungles. Generations of birds keep to the same nests. Recently I went back to find the bell-bird haunts, deep in the jungles of Cunningham's Gap, where I camped and boiled the billy as a boy, and was thrilled to find the same green gullies still echoing to the carillon of the small green birds.

They are honey-eaters, very small and active, and seem to know that they cannot be caught. When we left our vehicles to watch them dashing about in the thick branches they took no notice of us at all. They had built the most delicate of small hammock-nests, which swung like grassy cups on the outer branches of the smaller jungle trees. We picked up a nest that had fallen to the ground and found that it was most delicately lined with cobwebs.

Quite often bushmen, when searching in the mountain country for their "belled" horses have been led astray by the sound of small distant colonies of bell-birds. Where there are perhaps only twelve birds, the ringing of the bells is only intermittent and quite like the sound which "belled" horses make when feeding. I was caught like this myself once, when high up on the Lamington Plateau of the Great Divide, I went searching for my horses deep down into the jungle gullies, and found instead the bell-birds.

We stayed for almost a week beside this lonely creek waiting patiently for the small marsupial animals as they came to drink. Being driven down the valley by fierce bush fires—the koalas—the opossums—the bandicoots and rock wallabies—and even the wombats showed up, each in their own time.

We unrolled our swags on flat, clean ground beside the creek, and rigged our square mosquito nets over stakes at the head and foot of our beds, with tough calico strips to tuck under our mattresses—not so much to protect us from the mosquitoes as from the dampness of the mists and the snakes and insects, and to break the rays of the moon.

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No Australian bushman will sleep with the moon shining hard upon him. No matter where we laid our rubber mattresses they adapted themselves to the lay of the ground and were very comfortable.

The city and its tensions fell behind us on our first night in the open. All the strain of the months of travelling backwards and forwards across the sky lines, crossing half the world—talking, writing, attending conferences, planning and organising—fell away. We lay in our swags listening to the music of the stream at night—to the mopoke in the trees and to the chorus of whistling birds in the morning. As a bird-song land, Australia is without par in all the world, nearly half of its 700 odd recorded species being song-birds.

The billies didn't boil until quite late on that first morning in the Great Divide. When the sun came round the mountain we woke up and went for a swim. The water was like champagne. The world was wide and free and life was very good.

Our fire was made mostly of dried twigs and leaves of the eucalyptus trees. We like to make our tea in an open billy-can, with a green twig placed across the top to stop the tea from smoking too much. All the sweetness of the bush then seems to go into the tea as the sting of the smoke is absorbed by the sap of the green twig. When the billy boiled and tea was thrown in, we let it stand for just three seconds; then removed it and tapped it all round to make the tea leaves go to the bottom.

Late one afternoon we found the strangest of all Australian living fossils, a duck-billed platypus actually crawling on its webbed feet across a small piece of mud between two pools. He frisked into the clear water and raced madly about among the moss-covered stones for yabbies (crayfish). He surfaced for air, rippling the surface of the water and was gone again.

I had no chance of catching this platypus, so couldn't tell whether it was male or female. The male is the larger, and is armed with two sharp spurs on the inside of the heels of his hind feet, which are hollow and are connected to poison glands. A jab from one of these can cause great pain and swelling, so it is foolish to rush in and grasp the little fellow carelessly, even if it were possible to do this. The platypus or *Ornitharhynchus-paradoxus* is half mammal and half fish. Only mammals have fur and the little platypus possibly has the most wonderful fur of

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any animal. We have heard it reported that a platypus rug was recently valued in London at £2,000.

It is the oldest known oviparous mammal on earth and is believed to be the outcome of some union of mammal and reptile away back in the Mesozoic Age. Australia has two representatives of this strange mix-up by nature: the platypus and the little spiny ant-eater or *Echidna*; and even in Australia the platypus can only be found in the semi-tropical and cooler areas of the Great Dividing Range. These two little animals, which we saw quite often in the mountains of the Divide, are regarded as the missing links between reptiles and mammals.

Our little missing link swam away into the dark waters below an overhanging bank and it is quite likely that it had its long tunnel-like burrow in this bank, although we failed to find it. A platypus burrow can extend into a bank for as far as twenty feet and its nesting chamber is lined with fine grass and leaves. Generally only two eggs are laid and when the babies emerge they live and grow on their mother's milk, which they suck from a fur-covered duct in the mother's side.

We had periodic visits from beautiful parrots of all colours. Blue mountain parrots would settle in the tall eucalyptus trees along the bank of our creek—their plumage and beaks shining in a wonderful mixture of green, yellow, scarlet and purple. They clustered noisily about the leafy blossomed tops of the trees, licking the honey with their rough tongues. Rosella parrots, with their amazingly massed colours, would sweep through our trees in a hurry and sometimes settle on the ground beyond the fir trees to feed. At night we became used to the sounds of the kangaroo rats and bandicoots; the 'possums, the marsupial mice, the wild cats, and once we saw a flying squirrel in the tree tops. We always had plenty of company.

The thing that pleased us both was the confidence shown to us by the wild animals, once they knew we intended them no harm. We particularly liked the little bandicoots who hopped into the light of our camp-fire in search of titbits. If we kept very still and quiet, they would come right up to us.

The little bandicoot, which looks more like a large rat than a miniature kangaroo, sleeps in the long grass tufts all day and goes out at night to feed on roots and grubs. When they move in pairs they make grunting noises. The kangaroo rat, of course, is a miniature kangaroo



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and is also a nocturnal wanderer who goes in search of roots and bulbs and grasses. He is more noisy than the bandicoot as he scratches away with his sharp claws, and makes a thudding noise on the ground as he hops in great leaps. The savage native cats are spotted and resemble great rats. They prowl about mostly in search of the little marsupial pouched mice, and will even waylay and kill the bandicoots. There is terror then—sobbing grunts and strange little cries—but nothing can equal the pitiful cry of a baby koala bear attacked by one of these wild cats. Its cry is human, like that of a child, and the most upsetting sound to be heard in the Australian bush.

Often, as we lay in peace, idly watching the clouds float over the moon, the animal world was facing up to its own problems. The sound of these peaceful little creatures could strike terror into the heart of a lone stranger in our bush, until he learned they were harmless. This immense mountain land offers a safe and peaceful solitude. In the daytime there are no savage animals to molest one, and the nights are bewitched by the nocturnal noises of the small marsupials. Man can stay in the Divide as long as he likes, living well from the land and the streams, and never at any time feel oppressed by danger.

History was written into the valley where Elsa and I camped by the signs of early settlement. A small deserted hut and the remains of outbuildings and very old fruit trees marked the path of the early movement of settlers into the land of the Great Divide. Once openings through the ranges were found, nothing could stop their progress. Sheep increased so quickly that they became the gold standard of the little colony. The Government of the day, powerless and without funds to provide a soldiery or police, or to give registration to all the lands the settlers possessed, in desperation forbade settlement apart from certain well-defined boundaries. But if the colonists didn't break these bounds the sheep literally did it for them. There was soon a front of thousands of miles to the spread of the settlers with their flocks and cattle, and it would have taken a large army to have held them back.

In the absence of effective preventive measures, the settlers spread through these valleys along the range and across the highlands. The Government sent its picked surveyors out in all directions to explore the land, and the settlers with their herds and flocks spread

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along the rivers close on the heels of the explorers, almost as soon as these rivers were roughly sketched into the Government maps—often before.

Those who had moved outside the law could not expect protection as they had moved along the rugged jungled length of the Great Divide and across it to the vast western plains at their own risk. Like the western lands of America, the lands of the Divide became lawless with constant warring for the best land, the stealing of cattle, the coming of the bushrangers, the fights with the aborigines and the forming of the Vigilant Committees.

The first men to pass through and use much of the country were exploiters. They had no security of tenure, and they could not secure a registration for their land. So they overstocked it in order to take as much off the land as quickly as possible. The aborigines resisted them and speared their cattle and often their shepherds; they retaliated and wholesale massacres often took place. Fires from settlers' and timber-getters' camps ravaged the land, and when the fur of the marsupials and of the platypus was found to have a value, these little animals were slaughtered in their millions.

At last, when the koala and the platypus and the wombat were almost extinct, the Government outlawed the sale of skins. Now they have bred again, and native bears and the platypus are to be found constantly increasing in their numbers in the valleys and streams of the Great Divide.

But the mighty black men of these mountains, the aborigines, have gone. There is little trace of them left except the beautiful-sounding names of mountain peaks and rivers and the poor remnants of mixed bloods, whom to my disgust the authorities and people will persist in calling aborigines, and treating their terrible problems as though they were the problems of the black man. Once having known and lived with the tribal full-blooded aborigines, as we have, we don't want their problems equated with those of the mixed bloods.

The aborigines in Australia are a long way out now—back in their last strongholds, in the centre of Australia, the far north and north-west and up in Cape York Peninsula. Later on we are travelling to the centre and the north with our cameras and then we will be able to live with the aborigines as he wanders over the face of a strange land.

## *The Great Divide*

Only four thousand persons were beyond the boundaries of the County of Cumberland (which is now the limits of the City of Sydney) when my great-grandfather came out from Surrey in England to take up land in the outback of Australia, and both my father's and mother's people were pioneers along the northern rivers of the Colony. When my great-grandfather settled on land beyond the Divide the land hundreds of miles farther north, in which I was born, had not been settled.

The Australian bush tested both man and woman—the weaklings never attempted to leave Sydney or to cross the Great Divide. It is said that the man and his dray and his dogs and his sheep went in where the tracks ended; often his destination was nothing more than a tree marked by an explorer, a hill with an outcrop of red rocks, or a river of sand half a mile wide. Mostly they went exploring farther out, pushing their cattle before them.

In the year my first Australian forebear came to take up land, settlers in long waggon-trains were crossing into what is now the State of Victoria; similar to those who were at the very same time crossing to Indian territory in the United States. Fearing the wild aborigines, settlers made their expeditions south in company with others. One settler who had been an English sailor led a dray-train of nine thousand sheep and forty men. At Broken River in the mountainous Owens country, the natives attacked and massacred a whole camp of seventeen men.

Alexander Mollison, a Londoner who had only been in Australia for three years, brought an expedition overland well into Victoria with 5,000 sheep, 662 cattle and 49 men. He headed a small army on the march through unknown country. He crossed the Murrumbidgee by a bridge built of drays, sheep hurdles and logs. He lived in grass mias with his men and built up a famous sheep station.

Another settler, right out of bounds in the south, scribbled a treaty and had the chiefs of the wild Darrabin tribe scratch marks upon it as their signature, in return for tomahawks and clothing. Using "Tomahawk Law" as they called it, he squatted on 600,000 acres of land.

Grass and water were the determining factors. Where the ranges or valleys held these offerings, the land-seekers went.

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The great plateaux to the north heard the sound of the axes, and even the bagpipes as settlers from Scotland pioneered the highlands hundreds of miles from Sydney; and cedar-getters kept abreast with the settlers by penetrating the mountains and scrublands of the coast. Men moving southward and westward were checkmated by the vast arid plains, some of which today are fed with the water from the Great Divide. Those in the north were slowed down by the formidable mountains and twisting valleys of the range which those settlers believed had no end.

All about us as we have camped and filmed through the years in the mountains and valleys of the Divide, we have found place-names which record the troubles and tribulations of our pioneers—Wilson's Downfall, Johnson's Retreat, the mountains called Repulse, Misery and Deception.

Six hundred miles northward from Sydney we find Cunningham's Gap, and facing the Gap, away to the east, is Flinders Peak. My father's homestead, called "Summerlands", lay half-way between these two great landmarks. A beautiful creek called Worral which ran through this land was named after Elsa's pioneer grandfather from Devon.

The very early history of the great range was savage, but as the settlement of the land became regularised—boundaries determined and states formed—law and order and good living and wealth came to it all.

The promise of adventure and rich reward attracted a strange assortment of settlers; the greater proportion of the pioneers here were from Scotland. There were no barbers where they went, so most of them wore full beards and moustaches. They wore strapped trousers of moleskin, blue crimean shirts, hunting-boots and spurs, and often a large hat made from the plaited leaves of the cabbage tree.

Some were the sons of successful merchants and officials in Sydney, and others were the men of moderate capital whose future was without opportunity in the British Isles. My grandfather on my mother's side was one of these. He came from Cumberland and took up land on the Clarence River. Many other pioneers were officers from the Indian Army, at a time when the Army generally was being greatly reduced. My great-grandfather, Charles George Chauvel, was of this category, being a retired Major from the Madras Mounted Infantry.

Among the early squatters there was Learmouth, a descendant of



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Thomas the Rhymer; McKnight of Dunmore, the son of the Church Historian of Scotland; Hector McLeod, the Man of Skye; and A. Mitchell with a famous library at his homestead of "Langi Willi", where Kingsley wrote *Geoffrey Hamlyn*. There was William Wallace of Elderslie; Black Cameron of Lochiel; Captain Murchison of the Ross-shire Yeomanry, and Captain Banbury who lost an arm at Navarion Bay; and Kelly of Kamarooka, famous for his pack of hounds. Then there was Lord John, the son of a Marquis who had introduced art, pottery and polo, and many foreigners like the Archer brothers who were Norsemen, and the de Castellás brothers who were Swiss Chasseurs. There were political refugees and the really down-to-earth fellows like Cocky Rogers and "Tinker" Campbell and the great Jim Tyson.

There is a limit to all times of sheer happiness and it was hard to turn our vehicles westward and away from the great rain-making range which made me happy as a king when I was a boy, and from the mountains in which Elsa and I went riding on our honeymoon.

If we have tarried a while too long about this range, with all its contradictions, it was because we have wanted you to know something of the truth and wonder of our land; something of our beginnings, and the meaning of the Great Divide which cradles the song birds and the heart and spirit of Australia; and with its rains and waters will continue to contribute so much to our destiny.

We turned our vehicles through a gateway to the west and headed for the wide, brown plains, and beyond to a very different land. A land of mulga and red sand, a land of gibber stones and seeping scars of salt—truly the Terra Australis incognita.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Open Spaces*

WE turned our backs on the Great Divide and pointed our vehicles to the west—to Broken Hill, the Silver City, seven hundred miles out on the plains, and to the great salt lakes in a desert of desolation.

We would be following the march of Australia's inland settlement in depth, wandering with our cameras for more than two thousand miles—right to the Timor Sea. We wanted to draw a profile of this strange land and find the truth about its deserts—the meaning of water; how it breeds something indestructible in man and woman in a land where they are still being put to the test, and find the real meaning of this outback land to all Australia.

There are stories to be learned from the rocks, the trees and the shrubs and grasses, from even the smallest animals and birds of this land.

It was with this in mind that we rolled westward along the Great Western Highway—Elsa and me and Harry. This was the first road ever built to tap the interior of Australia.

We pulled away from those goddesses of stone, the three mountain peaks called "The Three Sisters", and across the Great Divide. We had filled all our water-bags and carried surplus cans of petrol. But the development of this country is such today that we did not have to call upon the water-bags or take on extra petrol supplies until we were a thousand miles out and well past the Darling, which is the last great river with water. If you look at the eastern map of Australia, you will see this long river rising from the Great Divide and moving like a vast drain through the western plains for thirteen hundred miles, where it then meets up with another great river, the Murrumbidgee, and later, the Murray.

This is the Murray/Darling river system, one of the largest in the world and of the utmost value to Australia. Altogether the Darling



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River, from its source in the mountains to its entrance to the sea in South Australia, is more than two thousand miles long. It was down these rivers that the settlers poured with the abos contesting every yard of their precious waters.

For almost two hundred miles from the Great Divide, we travelled through the beauty of its fertile and prosperous eastern slopes and most of the towns we passed through had beautiful parks and gardens, with Olympic swimming pools and fine schools and well-equipped hospitals. Australia's vast wheat and sheep lands stretch along these eastern slopes of the Divide, and the black soil plains through which we travelled fell away in almost studied undulations until they met up with the first of the red lands four hundred miles to the west. When one moves out into this land they say in the cities of the coast that you are "going west". But the most westerly point is the Indian Ocean, lying more than two thousand miles across salt-bush plains, deserts and red mountains.

Our west has always been receding as the settlers pushed on farther. A thousand miles out and one is still facing it: the "Outback" or "Back of Beyond". But most Australians live in the cities where almost eight millions of our full population of ten millions are to be found with their backs to the west. Few ever see the real west beyond the sunset or get to know this obscure, tough land upon which they all depend. The best way of getting to know it is to make close personal contact, to roll a swag and sleep on the soil of the land.

It is undoubtedly one of the world's last frontiers for adventure and a vast land of opportunity. We like to think of the poor men who have moved into it carrying their swags and returning to the cities like kings. We like to dream of the riches it holds in gold, uranium, silver and copper; and of its opals, sapphires and rubies. We like to meet its infinite silence, and find peace; and make a fire and boil the billy where no billy has been boiled before.

It is a wonderful land, this land of haunting contradictions, which is a barren waste one year and a carpet of grasses and wild flowers the next.

On our first night out from the Great Divide, we treated ourselves to comfortable beds in an hotel in the happy and attractive town called Wellington. From Wellington, next day, the better lands slowly fell behind us, and we entered the great purple plains, and once in every



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fifty miles or more passed through little clusters of human life in the smaller, grey, galvanised towns, until the greater distance swallowed us. We were in the wilderness now and moving on to some of the world's oldest land. History has swept across it in waves, each wave a term of occupation with its own distinct character.

First came the explorers—Oxley, Mitchell and Sturt.

This is what Oxley wrote in 1817: "It is impossible to fancy a worse country than the one we are now travelling over—intersected by swamps and small lagoons—the soil a poor clay and covered with stunted, useless timber. *I doubt whether these desolate plains will ever again be visited by civilised man.*"

But within a few years hardy men and women were settling there. And here were we more than a hundred years later bowling along happily, passing through just a small part of one of our eastern states, which now carries sixty million sheep.

Four distinct and different phases of development have taken place in this land beyond the Divide.

First the journeys of discovery by the explorers and their tragic reports. Then the movement of the men who were too late or too poor to settle on the good lands along the Divide, and were forced to follow close upon the heels of the explorers regardless of their warning. They set out with their drays and their bullocks and their sheep, and following the rivers west, took land by tomahawk law. The story of their privations is a tough, heroic one, and the grandest of all pioneer stories, because although beaten by the terrible droughts, and many of them dying along with their beasts and the animals of the land they did not turn back to the towns or the softer lands. The remnants of this gallant band of settlers, too poor and destitute to buy more land, moved still farther out beyond even the last river with water—out into the blue haze of the salt-bush plains, and they never turned back.

Then came the third phase, when the men with the wealth to weather the bad times founded the great sheep stations. Their pioneering was backed by the discovery of gold and copper in this western land and in other parts of New South Wales and Victoria. This phase marked the coming of the first great migration of settlers to Australia.

Some of the richest finds of gold and copper and silver and lead were made deep in these plains. A man from San Francisco called Cobb,

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and other Americans arrived in Melbourne with a beautiful model of a Wells Fargo coach. They floated a great transport company known as Cobb & Co., and in time and with other large companies the long transport lines of coaches, at first with Wells Fargo drivers and then with Australian drivers, opened up all this country. Theirs, too, was a story of hardship and privation and hard-fighting competition. With this development came the building of paddle steamers on the rivers Murray and Darling, and the colourful days of the river and coach trade when for years the Darling at the ebb of each inland flood became the roaring, roistering Mississippi of Australia.

We are living now in the midst of the fourth phase, this incredible age of development. For many years now railways have stretched across the plains, right out to the Murray and Darling rivers and beyond, and good roads have come from the capitals of the three states. The competition of the railways forced the camel trains, donkey teams, paddle steamers, and coaches out of existence, and with their passing the strange old pageantry and the sweat and sorrow of the old bush roads has gone.

Today great freight trains and immense motor freighters rumble along the rails and roads and air transport quickens the pace of all work and living, and shortens the immense distances by reducing travelling time from days to hours, or from weeks to days. Mining has brought populations in patches to this land. But most of it is not for people, it is sheep country, and because of the vague dictates of the seasons, great slices will continue to pasture sheep.

I was day-dreaming at the wheel of our car, listening to the even purr of its engine on a perfect road when Elsa suddenly shouted: "Look Charles, the first galahs! Now we're really in the outback!"

A huge flock of the large grey-blue birds swept in a chattering cloud from the ground in front of our vehicle. They circled away from us, banked in the hot sky in beautiful precision showing the bright pink of their underwear, then turned to grey-blue again, then pink once more, and turning they swept away into the haze of distance.

After passing through Nyngan, which would be the last town for nearly a hundred miles, we boiled the billy at a muddy water-hole on the Bogan River and had our lunch of tinned red salmon, asparagus, bread and honey, and tea.

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We scattered the camp-fire beside the waters of the Bogan, and motored on through rolling woodlands of Cyprus pines through country which looked as though it had been planted to a plan. The sky was hot and the air dry. Red scars showed in the creek sides. Then we ran into the forests of mulga trees—or mulga deserts, as they are called—their distorted shapes resembling a tracery of death. They reminded me of the Joshua trees of the Mohave Desert in California. The mulga has a delicate grey leaf and the whole tree is a cleverly composed tracery of black twigs and twisting branches. When it flowers its golden blooms form like "bottle brushes" and are sweet-smelling and of great value to the wild bees in making honey. In drought time the mulga is felled to feed the sheep.

We made camp on a clean, hard claypan of red soil, not far from an earth tank and windmill, and noticed some drovers pushing their sheep over the dusty red banks of the tank to water them. Those earth tanks are really large dams holding as much as twenty thousand cubic yards of water and out on the great, flat plains they loom on the horizon like mountains. They tap the underground for water which is pumped by windmills; should the wind fail, diesel engines stand in readiness within tin sheds. These bores with their windmills and earth tanks unite and sustain the land and loom like symbols of man's power over nature.

The main road to the Silver City was also the stock route, so we were sure of having Government watering-places about every fifteen miles. At some of these tanks there are telephones in case of emergency and generally in drought time a lonely attendant sees that the mill is pumping water and the tank is kept full. He burns any dead sheep and lays poison baits for the dingoes (wild dogs) which come to prey upon the weakened animals.

We always like camping in the mulga scrubs as the ground is clean, and there is some semblance of shade and always a ready supply of wonderful tinder-dry firewood. We never had to use an axe in the mulga country as the sticks and even the larger branches can easily be broken by hand.

We had just stretched our tarpaulin from roof to roof between the vehicles, making a room for Elsa; and for the first time had unfolded and erected our small wire stretchers when the drover came riding

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over to meet us. He was a big man of about six feet and weighing perhaps close on two hundred pounds. He wore a khaki shirt and khaki trousers, which hung loosely over heavily worn elastic-sided boots from which dangled long-necked spurs. He wore a large felt hat full of dints and undulations. He hadn't shaved for a few days and his weathered features made it hard to assess his right age. He looked about forty-five, but could have been just over thirty. In assessing age out here, one has to understand the ageing effect of the sun, wind and the rain.

“ He dismounted, pulled the reins straight down over his horse's head, then passed them between the forelegs before tying them to the near side stirrup. The knot of course was tied under the horse's belly. This is an old bush trick and by keeping the horse's head down a little, makes it feel it is tied to something; a horse always likes to have its head well up to walk away. Like this a horse can stand and enjoy a snooze when waiting.

Harry had just finished building the fire when the drover came across to us to say “Good-day”. We learned his name was Carmody, and when he found we'd come from Sydney, he asked us if there was much water in the Bogan. We told him that where we boiled the billy it was just a muddy billabong, that it didn't look much like a river.

“The Bloody Bogan they call it out here,” Carmody said as he eased himself down into a squatting position beside the fire. “The blacks killed off the first fellows out here like bloody flies!” There were lots of murders in those days along the Bogan.

Then he saw Elsa coming and got to his feet, raised his hat a little and said: “Good-day Missus, it looks as though my sheep's goin' to 'ave some company ternight—you're camping here will give me a chance to take my mate an' our cook into town for a change.”

“Into town” meant motoring back about thirty miles to Nyngan.

“It's a good old tough country out here,” I said.

“Oh, don't you believe it,” he replied, squatting easily beside the fire again, “not with motor-cars and radios, and telephones, too, at some of the bores now—it gets a bit tough sometimes when it's dry, that's all.” He opened a tin of tobacco and started to pound some in the palm of his hand. “It's too civilised now, but it used to be tough out here when the first white settlers came. An' they were real people,

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my old grandfather was among them. They was just tough, hard people who learned how to handle this land. Those old boys were as tough as the rawhide of their bullocks," he went on, rolling a cigarette. "They were dram drinkers—drank their Bengal rum neat and my old man told me that a drop of that rum 'ad a kick like a mule from the Khyber Pass." He laughed and shook his head. "Oh no, it's civilised out here now, Missus." He completed his home-made cigarette by licking the sides, put it in his mouth, leaned forward to the fire and lighted it from a flaming stick.

"Looks like another drought now unless we get rain pretty soon," he said.

"It wouldn't be like the old droughts, would it?" I asked. "You're better prepared to meet it."

"Of course we've got the bores now." He pointed over to the earth dam with its windmill. "We're pumping the water up—millions of gallons coming up from underground every day."

Putting him to the test, I asked: "Where do you reckon it all comes from?"

"Up in the mountains, hundreds of miles from here," he replied. "Up in the Divide—the old basin underneath's always gettin' a new supply, every time it rains."

We had some very good hot coals for grilling and he watched Elsa who was having trouble with the gridiron, owing to the heat. I went to help her. "Look here, have yer got a shovel?" the drover asked. "Why, yes," I said. "We've two in the truck."

"Well, let me have one and I'll show you how to grill over big hot coals like that. Bring me a good flat-backed one."

I called to Harry and he soon produced quite a long-handled, flat-backed shovel, the kind we find to be most useful when stuck in the sand, and the drover wiped it shining clean by rubbing it first on the hard brown earth, and then with a sheet of newspaper. He turned to Elsa: "Now a piece of drippin' or a spoonful of butter please, Missus, so the chops won't stick."

Elsa handed him the chops which he arranged in the greased concavity, then placed the shovel over the hot coals. He kicked a large stone into place to balance and lift the long handle slightly from the ground. Soon there was a most appetising sizzle.

## Open Spaces

"There yer are, Missus—that's the only way a grill's worth while. But yer gotta keep turning them chops over on a hot plate like that." Then taking the end of the long handle he carefully drew the shovel with the chops out from the fire. "Yer see there's no need to get yerself baked when yer cooking with a good shovel—yer jest stand back at the end of the long handle and pull it off when you want to turn the meat. I often fry me eggs like this and make them 'blind' by grilling them on both sides."

This was a good wrinkle and from then on if our camp-fires were fierce we often used the back of our shovel for grilling.

While Carmody turned our chops, salted them, peppered them, and to our dismay even poured some Worcester sauce over them while they grilled, he kept up a flow of informative chatter.

"Of course they couldn't 'ave settled any of this country with anything but sheep, that can go for six days without water, and sometimes a man might 'ave to go that long himself." He looked up to us to emphasise his point. "The sheep's made this country and they've grown harder with the years, and the tough goin' 'as made them grow a poor starved staple of wool—and that's the very fine stuff that brings the big prices all over the world. It's good sheep country so long as you give them plenty of room to graze over. A man can do no good with less than twenty thousand acres out here."

He pulled the shovel from the fire and, finding the chops done, replaced them with two more, still talking.

"Our towns don't grow much unless they start a woollen mill or make 'Beckon Me' bathing suits or somethin'. I suppose there's a thousand people in Nyngan and another hundred miles farther on there's Cobar, and I s'pose there's two or three thousand there. Then you'll come to a patch of people, some with colour in them, at Wilcannia on the Darling River—that's all till yer hit the Silver City. That's where I have my home when I'm home. There's more than 30,000 people in the Silver City now."

He looked up. "Are yer goin' out west, eh!"

As we had already come five hundred miles westward we nodded rather wryly.

"Oh well, I'll have to be going," he said, as he straightened himself. "I got me sheep well yarded and there's only a couple of thousand.

## *Walkabout*

Will yer keep an eye on them in case the lad I've left goes wandering away? We'll be back about midnight or a little after."

We told him we'd be glad to and lifting his big felt hat again to Elsa, Carmody walked away from our fire in western fashion, with his spurs clinking on the hard ground. His dog, which had been sleeping under our Land Rover, stretched itself and moved to join him. He mounted easily, not slickly like an American cowboy, but with the easy and casual precision of the Australian bushman. Horse and man, welded together, turned against the red of the setting sun.

As we sat over our chops we puzzled over Carmody's "Beckon Me" bathing suits, and at last decided that he must have meant Bikinis, as a bathing-suit factory was already established in one of our large country towns.

We heard our drovers come back after midnight, singing something about a girl at a place called "Native Dog". Carmody was clearer than his mate and we caught a few of the lines of their song which went something like this:

"She thought that he meant business  
And so did many more,  
But it seems she made a terrible mistake,  
As girls 'ave done before.  
He wooed 'er in the starlight,  
And won 'er in the fog,  
But 'e never popped the question  
To the girl at Native Dog."

The next morning the drovers were counting their two thousand sheep out from around the big earth tank before we had finished our breakfast. They moved off across the plains with their herds as we drove away in the direction of Cobar. Clouds of dust soon hid them from view.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Old Man Kangaroo*

ALL that day we travelled steadily towards the setting sun. For quite a way the railway from Sydney to Cobar, our next big town, ran beside us. The country was drying up and everything stood out starkly in the full light, with little to break the sun. The mulga trees looked harsh and dry; the railway signal stops with the names of the sidings in hard white stood out plainly upon large black boards. Abandoned homesteads emphasised the loneliness of the plains with the wide skies behind and above them.

Everywhere we saw sheep grazing, and they seemed in good condition. True to most of Australia, the changes in the face of the country were subtle; at time over long distances the country looked like parkland, the soil turning gradually into a red sandy loam, undulating and ancient. This hard land, with its twenty inches a year rainfall, supported trees and shrubs which in other countries only existed as fossils.

The stunted trees of the inland are in great variety and of a tender beauty. Once we breasted a rise and saw a light blue sea of mulga spreading away from us as far as the eye could see. We crossed a ramp in a fence and dipped down into this blue sea and the clatter of the loose iron rails in the ramp put a large flock of emus to flight. They raced directly ahead of us and across the road at forty miles an hour, then slowed to thirty, and still held the road, their great ungainly legs flaying out in all directions. Racing like this, they reminded us of camels. Graceless and conical, their stomachs rumbled and rolled with hollow noises as an accompaniment.

We had a permanent fixture on the door of the Land Rover to allow an Aeroflex camera to be quickly fitted, so that we could film from the side as we drove along. As the emus refused to leave the road, we secured some wonderful shots of them in full flight, and with different lens we filmed big closeups of their heads and fierce-looking faces—



## *Walkabout*

their immense feet flying wildly about like peas thrown upon a spinning disc. They only left us when they were exhausted, and went slumping off through the mulga.

We passed another drover with a mob of about five thousand sheep. He had two half-caste drovers with him and another half-caste tailing his spare horses. This was the first touch of the aborigine we had seen since leaving Sydney and we had then travelled almost six hundred miles west. We were not to see the full-blooded aborigines roaming free until we had travelled another six or seven hundred miles, although the names of the old extinct Kamilaroi tribe were given to creeks and homesteads.

About midday the ugly mullock heaps of Cobar loomed up in the west and we lunched in this old gold- and copper-mining town, which had known the roaring days. It was a drab place in the wilderness, and everywhere it was plain to see it had known better times—but its stores were large and well stocked. Cars and trucks and station waggons as well as long road freighters were angle-parked and packed deep along the main street. The country has had prosperous years and Australians are spenders as well as natural long-distance travellers.

Roads come into Cobar from many towns along the Darling River, like Menindie, two hundred and fifty miles away, and from Wilcannia, one hundred and seventy miles away, and from Louth and Bourke, both less than one hundred miles away. Roads come in from the south from Ivanhoe and Hillston and Lake Cargellico; from Condoblin and Melrose and Tottenham, and of course the way we have come from Nyngan. Nine roads and one railway line which tap an area almost twice the size of Belgium converge upon Cobar. This applies to most townships of the outback.

Australian bush people travel almost from the moment they leave the cradle. After her confinement a mother will often travel home over any distance from one hundred to a thousand miles. A town like Cobar and all the other outback towns draw their people for shopping from very great distances, and when they come to town they like to stay a while.

We visited a shop which advertised itself as a purveyor of high-class meat and a family carcass butcher. We didn't need a carcass, but we did leave Cobar with some very tender fillet steak for dinner that night and some locally made sausages for our breakfast next morning.

## *Old Man Kangaroo*

We were really in the wilderness now, for our road sped ahead for almost two hundred miles without a sign of habitation—only big earth and iron tanks with their attendant windmills. Soon we were travelling through a desert of sweetly flowering mulga. There were good grasses between the trees and big-man kangaroos and flocks of emus constantly kept us company and our cameras were kept busy trying to capture true action shots of the great bounding animals and birds. Shallow, dry, sandy water-courses sometimes laced the plains and along these grew beautiful park-like bushes—the water bush, the turpentine bush, the beefwoods and the myalls.

We crossed into some slightly wooded hills with small well-grassed valleys covered with groups of feeding emus. We stopped and I resorted to an old trick to attract the emus to our cameras. Elsa and Harry stayed quietly back in the trucks with their cameras in the ambush provided by the vehicles, while I lay on my back out in front in the long grass. By putting my foot into my large felt hat and by holding my leg high above the grass and moving it about, I appealed to the curiosity which is so much part of an emu.

Soon they came up; trotting at first, but as they neared this strange be-hatted object waving above the grass, they moved in very cautiously.

I heard the click of the cameras and knew that Elsa and Harry were getting some good shots. Soon I was being stared at by a number of most fearsome-looking faces.

The emu is second only to the ostrich in the bird world, and these big birds were about five feet high. I heard the sound of rustling grass somewhere at the back of me and thought of grass snakes. My leg was getting tired, so I let it drop. Pandemonium at once broke loose as the emus bolted in all directions. One jumped right across me—its great feet within inches of my face.

Elsa and Harry were laughing their heads off as I picked myself up and came back to the trucks. "It's just too bad if you so and so's haven't got some good shots," I said. "What was that rustling at the back of me?"

"Two emus came up," Elsa said. "We didn't notice them at first. They came in round the back of our vehicles and one was just going to put his head down and have a good look at your face, when you decided to drop your leg."

## *Walkabout*

"You should have been able to fill the screen with some big B.B.C. close-ups," I said, "You know, the ones which tell whether an animal is sad or happy. Anyway, I've looked right into the eyes of a wild emu and he's neither sad nor happy—he looked like Frankenstein to me."

Both Elsa and Harry assured me that they had secured some really big close-ups, so we could afford to leave the emus to their little valley and travel on again.

We pushed on through this attractive timbered country for more than a hundred miles and in that time we passed two cars, a passenger coach and an immense freighter piled high with the bodies of motor cars. Then we ran on to plains of prickly spinifex, salt bush and blue bush. There was little in the way of grasses, except the frail "never fail" so aptly named, because it grows throughout the driest times. This land has a haunting beauty all its own. It was purpling a little now as the afternoon latened, and the haze of the distances became very blue and obscure, the enormous skies paling and banks of thin cloud upon the horizon drifted across the sun.

Flocks of galahs rose constantly before us and away amongst green grasses to the right, the only true cranes that Australia has; the long-legged Silver Native Companion (Brolgas) danced gracefully, throwing what looked like a ball of feathers, high into the air. We stopped, hoping to film their dancing, but at that very moment they rose from the ground and swept away across the plains—skimming the tops of the shrubs and high grasses.

Then we ran into mulga country again, interspersed with small tree-dotted plains and red scalded patches which we commonly called claypans. The sun was setting, and as we were about forty miles from our next town, Wilcannia, we decided to pull well away from the road and look for a good hard claypan to make camp. These are formed in loose, loamy country where the surface soil has a low cohesion in the dry state, and when it is removed by the wind, the heavier subsoils which are not subject to drifting are exposed. The surface therefore becomes completely flat, smooth and polished by the winds, and because of this their "scalds" make a firm, clean and level camping ground.

We swung our two vehicles into line with their backs turned against the prevailing wind and brought the big tarpaulin across, forming

## *Old Man Kangaroo*

our double room between the vehicles and stretching well out from the other side of the Land Rover to make a port cover for Harry's stretcher. Then the tarpaulin is pegged into the ground across the rear of the vehicles so that no wind can get in. The tailboard of the Land Rover comes down, upon which the cases with the kitchenware and groceries are opened, and the long trestle table and easy canvas chairs put out.

This lounge-dining room is always set up directly in line with the rear of the Land Rover, so that the sleeping quarters have a little privacy. Large, striped canvas curtains hang across the front of our sleeping places and strong raffia matting is laid beside our beds. We had bedside chairs and a line for coat hangers, and our swags opened up with well-made and comfortable beds with clean sheets and attractive blankets. We would have our laundry days beside the lonely tanks with windmills, and at cattle and sheep stations where our linen and clothes would be kept up to the mark. We each carried two sets of spare sheets and pillow slips which were packed away in a big linen box in the Land Rover.

In no time we had our camp-fire burning, the billies on, music over our radio, comfortable chairs around the fire and a canopy of stars above us. We sat back in comfort looking out across the green plain of our northerly aspect. It was enclosed by large, sandy hummocks, held together from the winds by the emerald-green nitrate bushes and patches of "cats' paw" which is an edible little bush, enjoyed by the kangaroos. The plain itself was dotted with the pastel patches of blue bush (kochia) and corkscrew grass. Later, Elsa strummed for us on the steel guitar our Australian folk-song "Waltzing Matilda" in different moods, from the plaintive, haunting sadness that this country sometimes knows, to the rollicking way the shearers played in the great sheds along these western rivers. That night as we lay in our bunks we heard the lonely call of the dingoes, away out on the plains, for the first time since we left the Great Divide.

The next day, at dawn, I rekindled the camp-fire and set about the business of making the early morning tea and toast—an almost sacred ritual until the hot weather set in. A slight mist was rising from the plains as I scooped away the grey mulga ashes of the fire and found red-hot coals underneath and began to set the small acacia twigs upon the coals. I sensed I was being watched and looked up quietly to the





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to look over the plain. Between our camp-fire and a small "jump up" of ground with small shrubs in the far background, there were quite a number of kangaroos feeding. I turned my head to the right and found two rabbits sitting watching me on their mound just beside our claypan. Another kangaroo passed slowly at the rear of the other two, who were still transfixed by the scene they saw—a human so close to them, and actually making no attempt to disturb or harm them. I had never experienced anything quite like this. We have often had animals of all descriptions coming about our camp, while we slept, and there were the little bandicoots who used to come hopping to our camp-fire in the Great Divide, but never anything as intimate as this.

My fire was progressing well and my difficulty at this point was how to turn to the table and cut some pieces of bread without frightening the kangaroos, so I decided to move in a way a kangaroo might understand and crawl on my hands and knees to the table. I kept an eye on the kangaroo as I did this. It stretched itself up to its full height, as though it was making quite sure it would not miss one detail of this strange behaviour. I rose quietly behind the camp-table and unwrapped our loaf of bread from its plastic covering. The crinkly sound of the plastic brought the other kangaroo into line and they both peered over and sniffed as I cut three pieces of bread for toasting. They both scratched their stomachs as I went down to my hands and knees again and started to crawl back to the fire.

A sleepy, husky, early morning voice called just above a whisper. "What on earth are you doing?" It was Elsa looking at my absurd antics from above the canvas curtain.

"Kangaroos!" I whispered.

Elsa just had time to see the two kangaroos straighten themselves up to their full height and turn, sweeping away in great bounds towards the red fire of the rising sun. In a matter of seconds the plain was in full light and all the kangaroos had gone. There must have been at least twenty feeding about our camp.

I often think back to that morning when two wild creatures almost shared our camp-fire and our billy tea at dawn, and how intimate one can be with the wild animals of our land if you move among them with care and affection.

## *Walkabout*

Clouds of chattering red-breasted galahs came to feed on the herbage about our claypan as we enjoyed the Cobar sausages and hot buttered toast and a good brew of tea, and talked over our plans to move casually through this attractive country, filming whatever we could find of interest, and making Wilcannia if possible in time for lunch.

Many miles farther on we met a large road coming in from Ivanhoe, a settlement farther down the Darling River, and then had our first sight for a long time of big gum trees looming up as we entered the area of the great river's influence—a low, flat expanse of some miles in extent which is under water when the river floods. Here the road from Louth joined us and then the line of immense river gums showed up; the buildings of the town along the bank appeared and the big white bridge across. This bridge has large white towers at both ends with wheels and hawsers for lifting the central portions to allow steamers to pass. The steamers no longer pass but the towers and their machinery remain as relics of historical interest.

We stopped our vehicles at the approaches to the bridge and photographed the famous river as we saw it at this time, just a series of long water-holes with immense gum trees lining the banks—forty and fifty feet above the muddy water—their great roots exposed by the erosion of the floods and hanging far out from the trees and down the black-soil banks like the thick unkempt coils of Medusa's hair.

At one spot, just south of the bridge, the water had stopped flowing and at this point it would have been quite easy for us to walk across. The river here has often been two miles wide.

Before moving into the town of Wilcannia we reminded ourselves that except for a water-course out in the Flinders Range, two hundred miles farther on, this would be the last river we would come to with permanent waters, until we had travelled another two thousand miles and come to the Katherine River in the Northern Territory. From now on the meaning of water underground, and the sight of the great earth dams and the windmills turning against the hot skies, would come to mean a great deal to us.

Wilcannia's main street was busy with trade from far overland, from the distant towns along the river and from the deserts and northwest from here, where the famous opal-fields of White Cliffs and



## *Old Man Kangaroo*

Lightning Ridge were to be found. We had lunch at a café which would have made a wonderful setting for a western movie, but few in our audience would know just where such a scene took place.

Some of the half-caste aborigine girls from the native settlement across the river were really handsome and quite a few of them looked Tahitian. Some day, when proper interest is taken in these people, I feel sure that many of these coloured girls from these far-western towns will make their mark upon the theatre of this country. Prospectors and opal gougers, miners and cattle and sheep drovers, were all mixed together here. A young native boy came into the café with a number of fat, fresh-water cat-fish to sell to the Greek proprietor, and white children and half-caste aborigine children crowded in with pennies and threepenny bits for ice-cream cones and "all day suckers".

The dusty, powerful young drivers of overland freight trains came in and ordered large plates of steak and onions and eggs. This is the favourite diet in the west and it was at this point on the menu that we indulged ourselves. Well fed, we left the river and the town with its substantially built homes of stone and cement, and soon were out on the barest of great plains leaving Wilcannia a little blot on the eastern horizon.

On the plains we saw our first mirage—the phantom waters of a lake shimmering in the heat as we moved towards it. It kept advancing before us for some miles then it stopped still and slowly faded out. The country here was stark and dry again and as we travelled in a cloud of dust I thought of the early pioneers who had threaded their way along the waters of the Darling out on to these plains and built their homesteads. The first pioneer to move up the river with his horses and cattle was a boy of seventeen.

At another watering-place called Myalla Tank, we came across a mob of ten thousand sheep being driven from the waters by five drovers. This was the largest mob of stock we were likely to see on our travels so we moved along with them for a while and did some good filming. At sunset a long line of river gums marked the whereabouts of Yancowinna Creek, and we followed its banks away from the road until we found a scalded patch of earth on which to make a camp for the night.

We were now thirty-three miles from the Silver City.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *One Man's Dream*

**E**VEN before we crossed the Darling River we were on the fringe of what I shall call the land of the dead lakes, because it contains the immense scars of salt lakes that pockmark the map of Australia and forms the basin of the ancient inland sea. It stretches for a quarter of a million square miles and is bounded by the Darling to the east and a dry salt lake four times the size of the Dead Sea to the north. It is sparsely settled, and the life of the area centres on the desert town of Broken Hill. Here is the Flying Doctor base, and here the School of the Air, both of which minister to the needs of the outback settlers.

One hundred and twenty years ago the land was roamed over by aborigines; the most primitive people in existence. Driven by need, they learned to live off the land; digging for wicketty grubs in the roots of the mulga and mimosa trees; digging for the frogs that burrowed underground for the dry season, swollen with water; digging for the wild bees and honey-eating ants; grinding the seeds of grasses to meal in crude stone crucibles.

Into this unknown area one white man was to penetrate; he was to explore it and suffer everything that searing heat and exhaustion could do. He was, in the end, to give part of it his name—Sturt's Stony Desert.

Charles Sturt was an Englishman, the son of a judge, and born in India. The eldest of thirteen children, he was educated at Harrow, served in Wellington's army at the tail-end of the Peninsula Wars, and came to Australia with his regiment in 1827. At once he fell in love with the country. After his arrival in Sydney, he wrote home: "In a climate so soft and enchanting that few have left it but with regret . . . the spirit must needs be acted upon and the heart feels lighter."

Two years later Captain Charles Sturt led an expedition out into the wilds and discovered the Darling and other long rivers that ran

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from the Great Divide to the arid interior. He became obsessed with the belief that there must be a great inland sea somewhere, because the rivers had never been followed to their end. So, with three soldiers and three prisoners, a carpenter, and the young son of the Colonial Secretary, Sturt set off to trace the course of the Murrumbidgee River. He succeeded in linking it with the Lachlan River, but became trapped in unendurable heat in the unending marshes. Sturt set about getting a boat built, and the party journeyed down the Murrumbidgee to follow the river to its end.

It led them through treacherous rapids and threatening aborigine tribes—and then it joined the noble Murray River, then the junction of the Darling, and down the great combined stream to the ocean front of South Australia. They were overjoyed, although weak and exhausted and dangerously short of food. They had discovered that the rivers were navigable for 2,000 miles. That fact wouldn't feed them, and no one would know unless they made their painful way back through hostile country to tell people. Going back was against the current all the way. They rowed the clumsy boat, they pushed it through rapids, they carried it over swamps . . . for one thousand seven hundred miles. It was one of the greatest feats of endurance ever told. By the time they reached home after six months, they had travelled three thousand miles in all.

But Sturt was not satisfied. He still hadn't found that inland sea that haunted him; he longed to set out again to the hot centre. It looked as if his dream was shattered. He had temporarily lost the sight of one eye, and the extreme hardship of the journey had broken his health. He was shipped back to England with an attendant.

A year later he was back again, fully recovered. And that year had not been spent merely in getting well. He had pestered the Colonial Office to bring about a settlement of the lands in South Australia, the coastal section where the great rivers emptied into the sea. He had his wish, and personally led a party with stock down those same rivers to provide the settlers at the new city of Adelaide with food.

Six years later he set off on what was to be his most heartbreaking effort—to reach the inland sea that shimmered for him like the pot o' gold at the rainbow's end. It was odd, indeed, very odd, that a pot o' gold did lie in that land, but he was not to find it.

## *Walkabout*

Eighty miles west from the Darling, Sturt climbed the hills of a grey, rocky range and to the top of a particularly rocky and broken hill which the aborigines called Wilu-Wilu-Yong. There was nothing beyond, except mirage. He was ten million years too late: the country he looked at had once been a great inland sea and was now a series of dead salt lakes, dry watercourses, deserts of sand and stone and strange-coloured rocks. He was not to know that this type of country stretched across the continent for two thousand miles, so he pressed on northwards, looking for water. But the drought season was on them, and if Sturt's assistant, surveyor James Pool, had not discovered a large water-hole at the foot of a red hill, they would have died of thirst. Sturt at once named this hill Mount Pool. But they were in a quandary. The water-hole was drying up, yet they dare not leave it, suffering as they were from scurvy and sandy blight. James Pool died and was buried beside the water-hole that bore his name.

Then, just in time, the rains came, and the bare wide land unfolded itself in a splendour of grasses and wild flowers, and every claypan became a lake bordered by gilgai peas, mustard grasses and glorious portulaccas. Kangaroos and emus grazed across the plains in their hundreds, and swarms of parakeets and galahs and small honey-eaters came to feed off the grubs and the honey of the wild flowers.

To ease the strain on their provisions, a number of the men were sent back, but Sturt and eight others bravely continued their journey towards the centre. They sighted the great salt lake of Frome and discovered Strzelecki Creek and well-grassed plains. But beyond there always lay the long heart-breaking stretches of sand and the dry water-course which was to carry them northwards into even more terrible country.

They followed these strings of water-holes to within one hundred and fifty miles of the centre of the continent. On all sides the country worsened, and with the approach of a second summer of terrible heat, Sturt fell back to the mountain-locked water-hole at Mount Pool. They had ridden nine hundred miles over a period of seven weeks, and men and horses were again exhausted. But only after a short rest, Sturt with only two men this time, and fresh horses, set out again to what seemed certain death.

This time he worked his way up north and discovered Cooper's Creek, where sixteen years later two other explorers, Burke and Wills,

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were to lie and die a slow death from exhaustion and starvation. Beyond Cooper's Creek, desolation again. As far as he could penetrate there was nothing but a desert of stone.

This terrible tract is known today as Sturt's Stony Desert.

Once again Sturt had to fall back, and this time he retreated to the Darling, and then staggered into Adelaide with his men while prayers were being read for their safe return. He was a living skeleton, and once again his sight had failed him. He had been away for eighteen months, and all this time, his wife, Charlotte, had anxiously waited. He was a satisfied man. He had followed his dream, and even if he had lost, he had at least proved to all those who came after him that the inland sea was only a dream, and that the rivers flowing inland lost themselves in a desert of sand and stone. He added more to the slowly forming map of Australia, and gave warning of the strange deceits of the climate. Don't go in, don't trust it, was his message before he took ship for England for the last time. He died near Cheltenham, far from the rigours he had known, and this pertinent inscription is carved on his headstone:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

Fifteen years after Sturt's return from the land of the dead lakes, the settlers were moving westwards from the Darling, right into the lands he had condemned. The hill he had climbed was called Broken Hill, and round it spread a great cattle-holding, Mount Gipp. The good seasons which followed Sturt's exploration encouraged men to bring cattle to an area of supposedly good water-holes and grasslands. So they built homesteads. At first all went well. Then the seasons changed. They swung into a dry cycle, and once again it was Sturt's land, the land he had warned the world against.

Cattle died in their thousands and the fine herds that were raised over the good years on the rich pastures staggered away, bellowing, their tongues hanging out, in search of water—only to find bogs. Thousands of beasts slowly sunk in a hundred different billabongs and water-holes reduced to filth and slime, just as the immense herds of Diprotodons sank to their deaths in the disappearing water of Lake Callabonna ten million years before.

## *Walkabout*

The women who first went into this land had their babies all alone, with only a woman of the Wadikali tribe to help. They and their children had no security, and a child's education was attended to by an overworked mother between chores. If a cattleman and his wife could afford it, they sent their children out of the country to school when they were ten. The children went by horse and bullock-dray and then down the river on the paddle-steamer and across the long dry plains by Cobb & Co's coach. Some boys, unable to go to school learned from life instead of from books. If they survived, they rode away with cattle or stayed to carry on where their fathers had left off. They became as tough as the ground they lived on, and their kind spread across the continent. Few of these older men are left, and you might not like them if you met them. You could never understand them, because they are like the land they conquered; puzzling and indestructible, a different breed.

Twenty years after Sturt's retreat, paddle-steamers were running the whole course of the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Darling Rivers, and were moving in one year as much as a hundred thousand bales of wool from the western plains. The river trade had established small townships along the Darling, like Burke and Wilcannia, where we had crossed the river and saw the half-caste girls who reminded us of Tahiti. These little towns formed the bases for the still persistent thrusts with cattle into the land of the lakes. It is from little die-hard towns like these that our country has been settled.

Then things really started to happen. A prospector found a showing of silver in the ranges west of the Darling and the rush set in. It was disastrous. There was no water where the first silver was found, and few catchments for the winter rains. Many of the fortune hunters turned back on the very fringe of the desert and were rescued by Afghans with their camels from Port Augusta. Many died of thirst. Only a handful reached the barren range, and it is recorded that only five experienced prospectors ever reached Broken Hill—of these, only two returned.

That rush produced nothing. The country was left to its droughts and its blinding red-dust storms. But later silver was again located all along the range, and ironically enough gold was found right at the water-hole where Sturt and his men had dragged out their agonising

## *One Man's Dream*

six months, and just within a few yards of where Pool died. The deceitful land was giving up its riches one by one, and hundreds of men started to ride out to their deaths in search of them. Gold was found farther along the track taken by Sturt, but still the water problem defeated fortune-hunters. Gold and silver were everywhere, and it was only a matter of time before pure silver was being found at places where the scantyrains could be trapped. Then the first hard-won victories came the way of the adventurers. Some still lost their sight, and some went mad and shot themselves. But more came to take their place at the mining-fields which slowly established themselves. Names like "The Pinnacles", "The Lubra", "The Search" sprang up in a hitherto nameless desert.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *The Silver "El Dorado"*

**T**HEN something happened, something that was destined to completely change the character of the country. The world's richest find of silver and lead was discovered by a boundary rider on the broken hill where Sturt had stood and looked out over the shimmering mirage. George McCulloch, a tough Scot, who managed Mount Gipp, called the boundary rider and five other men on the station together to form a syndicate and to prove and exploit the find. There were seven men and seven shares which were later divided into fourteen shares. When more money was needed to work the mine a cattleman called Cox played a winning hand of cards against McCulloch on a wager and gained the Scot's fourteenth share in the syndicate.

Just three years later that fourteenth share was worth £1,250,000, and that broken hill became the world's greatest silver mine.

Long camel trains from Port Augusta joined with the Darling River steamers to supply the lifelines and the State of South Australia, pushed a light railway to reach northwards to the lands of silver and gold.

Any catchments in the bare hills were dammed and every desert soak close to a find of silver was pumped. Bores were put down to tap the water underground.

The town that grew about that hill, through all the sweat and sorrow and the sweeping dust storms from the country of the lakes was called Broken Hill. Today it is often proudly alluded to as the Silver City. Wonderful treasures in almost pure silver came from the bowels of that hill—beautiful formations like coral; delicate ferns with flashing colours and fish-tails and bird-tails and mushrooms.

Roaring hotels dotted the dust and heat-ridden town. Some of them mere shanties of wood and tin. The beer rolled in on bullock-drays and on camels from the paddle-steamers on the Darling, just as the



## *The Silver "El Dorado"*

concert teams with the bawdy women came in. But water was ever the problem. What they could dam was not enough, and as soon as the railway came, special trains carried the water from dams and wells seventy miles away, and then in the end they piped water from the old man Darling. It looked as if the wasteland was being conquered at last. But disease took over—typhoid, dysentery and pneumonia filled the hospitals and cemeteries. Drought and the dust storms called "The Red Terrors" dogged the town that was madly making millions. The mines pumped putrid water from wells out in the desert to keep the machinery working and the people of the town were rationed to spoonfuls. The slimy water of the wells was strained through cloth and boiled and for a while it seemed as though the town would have to be abandoned. Broken Hill was so rich that most of the money put up to back it was never needed, it paid for its own development. Within just three years the company, (cattlemen, a surveyor and a rabbit inspector) was producing silver and lead from its own furnaces, and catchments in the hills were so dammed as to provide a storage of 500,000,000 gallons of water from the first rains. Twenty-five thousand people flocked to Broken Hill in those first few years of whom six thousand worked as miners or on the smelters.

Millions of pounds poured from the mines and the news of Broken Hill spread through the world bringing consternation to the stock exchanges. Today, 100 years since its beginning, a Broken Hill Proprietary share is still the sheet anchor of a wise portfolio of shares.

The mullock heaps that surrounded the town grew higher and the wide streets, named after minerals found in the mines, were deep in dust and packed and jostling with people from all over the earth; and a strange mixture of riding and pack camels, bullock-drays, pack-horse teams, dogs and goats. It has been boasted that of the first fifteen thousand men in the "Hill", as it was called, there wasn't a weakling among them. Flimsy wooden shanties went up along the main street with pretentious names like "The Denver City", "The Oriental" and "The Palace".

The town never slept. Men drank and fought and gambled madly, while the flares from the emptying slag pots, flashed the town with fierce stabs of red and gold. Today Broken Hill is a fine city with a population of almost 40,000, who live on the yield from silver, lead

## *Walkabout*

and zinc. The line of the lode is three miles long and more than sixty million tons of ore have been raised from the earth, valued at more than £300,000,000 and paying over £200,000,000 in wages. The ore is railed to Port Pirie in South Australia to be smelted. The Broken Hill mines have established the greatest steel works in the southern hemisphere. They have established Australia's largest shipbuilding yards and the Company holds large interests in smelting and refinery works, gold mines, coal mines, ships and railways.

In 1935 Broken Hill created a regeneration area, and the city now has fine parks and gardens, and this half-mile wide green belt, which almost encircles the town, is green and beautiful with luxuriant trees and grasses, lawns and flower gardens. This area protects the town from the worst the "Red Terrors" can do. The town stands where Sturt stood, soundly and firmly at the doorway to one of the harshest regions that we have had to conquer. It grew like a great mushroom and it had to be fed with beef and mutton. Stations that could be formed close to it had an immediate market. Then the discovery of the artesian and sub-artesian waters enabled cattle and sheep men to build homesteads and increase their herds with safety. At the same time that the Hill was raising itself like an immense Phoenix in the desert, great developments were taking place across a blank two million square miles. The telegraph line had been laid across the full breadth of Australia—copper mines had been opened in the rough, stormy sea of the Flinders Range—the railway which we were to film had crept through the desert for more than 500 miles to Oodnadatta and the artesian basin had been discovered and tapped and stock routes opened for cattle right across the lines of Sturt's exploring.

But still there was no real security. Babies were born, often to die because there was no medical care; and men who suffered accidents were sometimes carried on canvas slings between horses for distances of two and even three hundred miles to reach the nearest doctor. There were times when typhoid fever took all the children or decimated whole families.

Then the first missionaries went out, sometimes in horse-drawn buggies and sometimes on camels carrying a bible and a first-aid kit. They baptised and drew teeth and even acted as midwives.

In 1871 just when the first cattle were moving down the infamous

## *The Silver "El Dorado"*

Cooper's Creek, an old lady, a Mrs. Smith, died in a manorhouse called Dunesk, six miles from Edinburgh. In her will she bequeathed the income from two allotments of land in South Australia to the Free Church of Scotland, which in turn applied the funds to the endowment of a special mission area in the districts of the dry salt lakes. The field and work of this mission gradually extended until nursing hostels were erected in the far-away centres to bring some measure of medical and missionary help to the settlers, many of whom were Scots.

The mission was known as Smith of Dunesk Mission, and had its headquarters in the camel-camp settlement of Beltana on the railway to Alice Springs. From this grew the much larger one which now embraces three parts of Australia and had as its originator and driving force the immortal Rev. John Flynn who devoted his whole life to the work of establishing ten hostels in the areas of Australia that needed them most and the now famous Royal Australian Flying Doctor Service. But so much of it is owed to the little old Scots lady of Dunesk.

As soon as the first, frail aeroplanes made their appearance in the country districts of Australia at the end of the First World War, the Rev. John Flynn scoured the country for funds and men and women with ability to plan and bring into being a scheme which would place a mantle of safety across the immense inland. Many fine books have been written about the noble and wonderful work of the Flying Doctors of Australia, and how the amazing invention of an amateur radio engineer called Traegar made it possible for a small generator to be operated in the smallest camps and outposts by means of pedals and radio transmitter.

Today only a few of these old pedal sets are being used, as the latest Traegar receiver is powered from 6-volt or 12-volt batteries. But even today the whole system is alluded to affectionately as the pedal radio. The base is now the important thing and there are fourteen Flying Doctor bases established right throughout the inland of Australia, and some of course are more powerful than others.

Broken Hill has the largest Flying Doctor base in the whole of Australia and through this base it has established the world's largest schoolroom and the world's largest hospital ward.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Magic of the Air-Waves*

WHENEVER I enter the control-room of a Flying Doctor base at Cloncurry or Wyndham or Alice Springs or Darwin, I am caught up by a feeling of excitement and awe. It was like this when I went into the base at Broken Hill, the largest in Australia. Charles and Harry and I were standing by while the news came through from the scattered people of the outback.

The control officer, Frank Basden, was sending and receiving telegrams as we entered, and we were introduced in whispers to the various members of the staff. Everything was bright, new and modern. The radio panels, the control table, filing and record cabinets, the walls covered with large maps and cloud and weather charts. All the life of this vast land of lakes, right up to the Queensland corner, flowed through this main control-room. Weather signs and information are collected and meteorological data compiled from more than two hundred outposts and 40,000 telegrams a year are dealt with. There are three medical sessions a day, and a doctor, two aeroplanes and two pilots are always ready for emergency calls or for medical routines over an area of more than 200,000 square miles.

Frank Basden was having difficulty in picking up one of the outposts clearly.

"I'll call the list of outposts again," he said over the air. "When you hear your signal, switch on three times for yes and once for no". He did so but the carrier wave showed it was trying to get through but had failed. He checked with other outposts and found that a neighbouring station could hear because it was only fifty miles away from the one that was failing. So arrangements were made for the neighbour to take the messages and relay them to and from the base.

We, of course, were soon to become an outpost ourselves, although a travelling one like many others and Harry was busy taking

## *Magic of the Air-Waves*

up the registering of our number and checking up on the strict routine.

Our schedule only allowed us three days in Broken Hill to study the work of both the Flying Doctor and the School of the Air and to film all we could of the work at the base. We had to make plans to travel hundreds of miles out to the homes of many of the students and to take our cameras into the air with the Flying Doctor as he went out on calls or upon his medical rounds.

It was a hard-driving schedule—it had to be.

So still covered in the dust of the road, we sat on listening to all that was going and coming into that control-room. It was a world of phantom voices. Some were clear and some just audible. Others came on an airstream of spluttering static. Some were in falsetto, some shouted, and others droned. And voices came from mineralogists away out in the hot, dead mountains, searching for further treasure—from missionaries battling through the dust of the roads—from cattle buyers and well sinkers and road-maintenance gangs, and from comfortable station homesteads.

A list of stations, outpost radios and their call-signs was given to us with a description of the homestead and its location; its size in square miles and the number of sheep or cattle it carried, and how we could reach it by road.

We carefully checked the homesteads for all available power and found that most of them had lighting plants capable of supplying enough current to assist with the lighting of scenes.

Quite suddenly the traffic in telegrams cleared and the "Cockatoo" or "Galah" session came on. Officially this is called "Intercommunication between Outposts" but it is really a gossip session, when special schedules are arranged by the base which allows the womenfolk scattered over this quarter million of square miles to chat to each other once a day over distances ranging from twenty to five hundred miles. Of course every homestead is listening or is able to listen to all conversations, telegrams, or "medicals" at any time, although only two people can talk to each other at one time. There is no such thing as privacy in this immense outback. We have had shattering examples of that in our travels. You can't have an appendix, or a complaint to air, or a bunion or a bet on a horse—and you certainly can't be "expecting"

## *Walkabout*

without everyone knowing. You receive compassion or criticism according to your "deserts" and this judgment is not according to law or strictly conservative thinking. It's how you look in the eyes of the man or woman whom the country has shaped.

One woman, knowing that the whole women's world was listening, kept talking to them all as well as the friend she was speaking to. The conversation ran something like this:

"I must tell all of you this, and Mrs. Tomkins over at Adams Soak will enjoy this because she was with us when we smashed the springs in our car and had to camp out while Jack cut a sapling and made it do as a spring. We're still riding around on that sapling, Jack reckons it's better than the real thing.

"You know the trouble we've had with cooks—no good cook that can earn big money in the towns will come out as far as we are unless he's running away from the police, or he's a hopeless boozier or getting away from his wife and avoiding maintenance or something. Well we've had the worst cook we've ever had—nearly had all the stockmen chucking in their jobs, but he's a good photographer and we've kept him two months now to take pictures of our baby. We'd never have any pictures otherwise. Timothy's just a bit over four months old now and we've got beautiful pictures of him lying in his cot and out on the back verandah, and me bathing him out in the laundry, and our old black rouseabout holding him on top of our night horse seventeen hands high. Do you know that's the only time he grinned at us and Henry reckons he's going to be a great horseman. Now that we've got our pictures we're going to send the cook on his way before we lose all our men, or we might keep him till baby's christened, the Rev. Mr. Mackin is coming in with his religious pictures soon now and he's going to christen Timothy and marry our half-caste camp boss to one of the girls over at the Mission. Over to you."

Her friend came in laughing.

"Good on yer, Bess! I've heard all you said but you've been lucky to have a cook that can do something even if it's only take photographs. We've got a lamb at present, but she's only good because she's fallen for one of our stockmen. George reckons the good Lord sends the food all right but the devil sends the cooks. He says there's only one way to beat this cook business. We're going to spend some real money putting







## *Magic of the Air-Waves*

in a powerful dynamo and we're going to have a deep-freeze room. Then I'm going to cook like mad for a week—roasts, puddings, pies, and what-have-you and put them away in the deep freeze, so that all you've got to do with a roast is take it out and heat it up."

This sort of enjoyable gossip went on for an hour; children, clothes, cooking and choice bits of news. It was strange to hear our own names come into the conversation.

"I believe Charles and Elsa Chauvel are coming out our way to take movies of our kids taking their lessons from the School of the Air—it's all for television, I believe. The trouble is we'll never see what they take, television won't reach us for a hundred years, but the children are terribly excited."

She was wrong. It is possible she will have television within six years from now.

The base operator called all stations to find others desiring to talk and then as the babble of high-pitched voices came in with static across hundreds of miles we knew why the men laughingly called it the Galah or Cockatoo Session. This was followed by the afternoon medical session when by means of a special landline to his residence in Broken Hill, the Flying Doctor, Charles Huxtable, came to speak to his patients spread right across this vast area.

It was interesting to hear Dr. Huxtable advise patients to go to the medical chest and take pills from bottle number four, or to take the bandages from box six and the ointment from bottle eight, and give careful instruction for treatments over the air.

Although the first Flying Doctor base was opened at Cloncurry in the new state of Western Queensland well within living memory, the work of the Flying Doctors is already legendary and is perhaps the greatest single factor in the successful and happy settling of the outback. Although the doctors themselves would be the first to laugh off their feats of sheer heroism and self-sacrifice, the job they do is an example of goodwill to everyone. It is nothing to them to fly in their small Australian-made Drover planes through the high-summer storms or over flooded country to make crash landings—then to walk miles to reach patients who are seriously ill. But although they take risks themselves, safety in the air for patients once aboard is the strict flying rule, and

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their record is so good that settlers in the outback have complete confidence. Emergency operations may be performed anywhere—maybe after tying the plane to a nearby tree to prevent it from being blown away by gale-force winds, and the operating-table may be the tailboard of a truck.

We said good-bye to the base and packing ourselves into our dusty vehicles, set off for the hotel in Silver City.

We enjoyed cold drinks in our hotel lounge which opened into an old Colonial inner court, set in the heart of the hotel. The bedrooms and long passage-ways opened off on two storeys and a spacious stairway twined up to each ornate floor. It all smattered of the old Colonial days, when money was no object.

Broken Hill grew up grimly from desert stone and houses of hard-packed mud, bricks and cement and always the galvanised iron, because the sheets of iron are easy to transport, are lasting and easy to erect, and can never be eaten by white ants. But galvanised-iron is the drabdest, shabbiest, hottest building material in the world, and when it gets down-at-heel through time and rust the whole town or homestead goes down with it. To the back of our hotel the mullock heaps towered high and became lighted citadels at night.

As we motored to the Huxtables to dine we found the town crammed with people "window shopping" or going to dances or the moving picture shows and filling the cafes to overflowing. We passed the modern front of an undertaker's establishment and I thought of the first undertaker in the roaring days who called himself "Bob the Finisher", and the local bellman, Apple Jack, who rang all the town to the burials. What must it have been like in the days of the gold and silver rush? Swaggering characters swinging watch-chains loaded with nuggets of gold, the broad street all dusty and rutted with the wheels of heavy bullock-drays, and the kerb brokers hawking shares in the new finds out in the Sturt desert. A fortune or penury at the toss of a coin, or in a man's glib tongue. Gaslights in the streets, slag flares on mullock dumps.

We passed the fine new church which Charles' brother, John, had dedicated the larger part of his life to building.

Then we were at the Huxtables' house, it was set on a hill and made of finely fluted and attractively painted—yes, galvanised iron. It was

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enclosed by a high fence to keep the dust storms from swamping the house with fine red sand. The doctor met us at the door. He had just taken four medicals and had only now returned from attending a patient at Tibooburra. We were to accompany him on some of his trips across the quarter of a million square miles that made up his area. Territory that ran from the Darling across the land of lakes to the Simpson Desert, and from the Queensland border nearly four hundred miles to the north, to the Adelaide railway in the south . . . even farther, because the doctors know no bounds if an urgent case called. It was odd to see a great map dominating one wall of the surgery. It emphasised the difference between the hard-worked "town" doctor and the Flying Doctor whose work we were going to see at first-hand. I longed to be on our way. But first of all there was the equally amazing School of the Air to investigate.

### *The World's Biggest School*

THE next morning we were up early. Life in the Silver City starts at five o'clock anyway, although we couldn't breakfast until eight. Before leaving for our session with the School of the Air, and meeting its principal, Mrs. Gibb, we were lucky enough to take some shots of Dr. Huxtable taking off in his plane for the small township of Menindie. This was the sort of factual reporting we wanted to do, and it made a charming picture. The morning sun sparkled on the large red cross on the smart little plane, as Mrs. Huxtable and her two daughters helped the pilot push it from its hangar.

When we reached the square modern building at the north end of town, set in a corner of a public school playground, lessons had already started. Mrs. Gibb was on the air, so we tiptoed past the control cabin and into the inviting modern classroom that gave us a cool and restful welcome. Bowls of fresh flowers stood about, the lime-green walls contrasted with the white, grey and yellow curtains. Much to my surprise I noticed polished oak desks which ran the length of the room; there was a soft grey carpet on the floor. Everything was immaculate—only one thing was missing. The children. They were all hundreds of miles away.

The teacher's desk was dominated by an imposing microphone. Behind this sat the woman who controls the largest schoolroom in the world, with her ninety-three unseen pupils scattered over 200,000 square miles. Mrs. Gibb was speaking over the microphone when we came in, and we sat down quietly to listen and watch. She is a tall, middle-aged woman, this unusual schoolmistress, with attractively greying hair bound in braids round her head, smiling grey-blue eyes and a wide, expressive mouth. We realised as we watched that she possessed three essential characteristics: humour, kindness and strength.

The radio control-room was at the far end, and the general activity

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of this nerve centre of the school could be seen through a large plate-glass window.

"Calling 8RH, calling 8RH. Tell me something about the weather in your part of the country, Johnnie," said Mrs. Gibb. "Over to you." Some static followed, then a small voice from more than two hundred miles away began to describe the weather conditions at his own homestead. Mrs. Gibb looked over to us with a friendly smile and beckoned us to sit beside her table. On her right, on the left-hand wall of the room hung a tremendous map. I glanced at Charles and saw that he was already looking eagerly at it. A map to him is like an orchid to a woman. We got up to scrutinise it more closely and found that it was the same map the Flying Doctor and the Control Base had on the walls. It resembled the occupational maps of the war, with coloured drawing pins and flags grouped across it. Each flag pinpointed a homestead where there was a School of the Air pupil, and on the white paper flag was written its radio call-sign. Our eyes roved up that great expanse of map, imagining vast plains studded with salt bush or mulga, occasional hills with thirsty streams, a rocky ravine, some gums, a dam—and suddenly a little white flag on a red pin said 8NAG. This was a home, with a child. Then there was a space on the map representing about a hundred miles, before another white flag read 8ZE. The nearest neighbours were about forty miles apart. At the very top, near the Queensland border, separated from all the others by at least two hundred miles, was Pandi Pandi, the farthest pupil. What a lonely little flag it seemed, and yet it represented another schoolmate, another voice to be heard in this room every morning, because for these children the wonderful system of radio contact has cancelled out distance.

I don't know how Mrs. Gibb remembered all the call-signs. She asked a question—then what a din! Voices called and crossed each other in a confusion of static, as each child yelled its call-sign, demanding to be heard. It was the radio version of a schoolroom full of children with hands up waiting for the chance to answer. Mrs. Gibb listened carefully, then switched on the call dial, "GEA Wertaloon—over to you, Jane". At once the chatter stopped, and one little voice gave the answer.

Most of the children had never seen their teacher; and some asked her what she was wearing that day, or what flowers were in the school-

## *Walkabout*

room. Mrs. Gibb described the weather in Broken Hill, or related some amusing incident, all the time trying to create a feeling of "togetherness" between herself and her distant pupils.

There is, of course, Correspondence Education which is compulsory for the children who live outback. The School of the Air is chiefly social; providing the lonely children with a sense of companionship and a knowledge of other children's activities. Learning to handle a radio transceiver, and to speak to one another through it develops a confidence which they might otherwise have lacked. We heard them recite poems and tell of interesting events at their own homesteads and this makes the children very conscious of the role they all play in developing this part of Australia. They gain an intimate knowledge of what is happening every day at the homes of the other children. One has to sit in that beautiful room in the Silver City with its empty forms and listen to the happy voices of children coming from an area as large as France and hear them planning their work and their picnics and their holidays, all as one, to realise that there is something to be learned here that can be put to much wider use in the world.

On the day that we sat in that schoolroom, a little girl, Eileen Hathaway, away in an outpost of the Flinders Ranges was having a birthday. Mrs. Gibb brought all the children together to sing "Happy Birthday" over their radios.

We were very fortunate, while at Broken Hill, to witness the most unusual activity of the School of the Air—a play-reading; simple, perhaps under ordinary circumstances, but imagine a play being performed while the characters are separated from each other by hundreds of miles.

Each child took his or her correct cue over the radio, and dressed for the part, although unseen by anyone other than their own family. Before the play took place each child gave a description of his or her costume—while the rest of the cast listened at their radio receivers.

When school was over Mrs. Gibb came and talked to us about her work. We asked her why she kept all the empty forms and she told us that quite often children from the Broken Hill School came in to give all the children of the air the feeling that they were part of a large class of students.

"Do you ever see or meet your pupils?" Charles asked.

"I have only met a few, Mr. Chauvel—the McCalls and some of the

## *The World's Biggest School*

children just directly north from here, but I really feel that I know all ninety-three very well. I even know what they look like!"

"Are the children shy when they come to town or meet other children?" I asked Mrs. Gibb. It was just the question she hoped for, because her eyes lit up as she replied:

"We have always tried to make the children feel that they really do meet together at lesson time and I'll tell you about the Osman and Hotchin children, which I feel is a good illustration. Mrs. Osman, 500 miles away in Queensland was taking her children to visit the Hotchin family at Waka, a distance of about a hundred miles. The children had never met before. The Osman girls are very shy, but no sooner had they started than Marilyn began to chant "We're going to see Lance! We're going to see Lance!" Mrs. Osman enquired in a surprised voice, "But you don't know Lance?" to which the lass replied; "Of course we do, we meet him every morning in school."

We spent the next two days at Broken Hill filming all we could of Mrs. Gibb taking her classes and made our plans to visit the actual homes of some of the students whose voices we had recorded in the school play.

Driving out across Stevens Creek on the track that ran northwards, well into Sturt's Land, I searched the bare landscape for a sign of old Puga's camel camp from where twenty years ago Charles and I took a string of camels into the hills to film scenes for *Uncivilised*. I will never forget that time because Charles had me doubling for the leading lady and I had to ride a camel during the three days that the dust storm blew. But there was no sign of the camp.

The country looked old. How often we say this and how often we felt its age. It was a country of stone and nibbled grasses. The mountains loomed in great, round stony shapes, and it was here that the men and women of the Wadikali tribe worked with stone axes and chisels, with stone bowls and grinding stones, to grind the nardoo seed to meal. It was the strange land of the sacred Churinga Stones of the Wadikali religion. The Wadikalis have gone but their axe-heads and sacred stones and chisels can be found under the last of the old trees near the dead watercourses.

We swung through the dried-up courses and round hummocks of

## *Walkabout*

stone. Against the skyline the ancient trees stretched out massive grey arms. They were dead and as rigid as the mountains and stood like gigantic dry skeletons. There is fascination and peace in a desert.

It was Charles who took me to the Imperial Valley in California, just five years after we were married, to see the miracle the Canadian George Chaffey had performed by harnessing the waters of the Colorado River and turning them loose upon a million acres of desert land—land that looked more helpless than any we have in Australia. Today, Imperial Valley is a world wonderland and a great tourist resort. It was the same George Chaffey who gave Australia its first great irrigation scheme at Renmark and Mildura on the River Murray.

We in Australia have learned to respect the plants and shrubs that have somehow survived for ten million years and our plant physiology and pathology is studied in very advanced institutes—not only in big cities but out in the semi-arid lands which we are learning to understand.

Somewhere close to us were two great sheep stations Moomba and Corona, once managed by Edward Dickens, the youngest son of Charles Dickens, who crossed the Darling River with the first pioneers.

The sun went down; the hummocked range distorted by the heat haze from the lands farther back. There are always lands farther back, always the mysterious interior. It was almost midnight when we arrived at Yelka. The pretty, timber-styled house shone like a small Christmas cake in the bright moonlight. We almost fell out of our vehicles—we had been driving for eight hours. But there is no welcome more kindly and comforting than that awaiting the traveller to an Australian station.

Next day quite a little crowd of mothers and children watched us recording the voice of Mrs. Gibb as it came over the air to open the school day from two hundred miles away. Then we filmed the mothers dressing the children for their parts as elephants and turned our cameras on the line of little elephants who played "follow my leader" in and out of the attractive garden beds and romped on the lawns until their call came from Mrs. Gibb. Their costumes of hessian were really cleverly made.

As we waved good-bye we felt we had really discovered something; the final taming of the terrible land Sturt had set out to conquer, and which had conquered so many others.



### *Into the Desert*

WE crossed the border from New South Wales into the desert lands of South Australia at a point on the railway from the Silver City to Adelaide, 'called Cockburn (pronounced Coburn), and here we entered the salt-bush lands of the real Terra Australis Incognita.

I shall never forget that frail, desert railway line—so straight that it needled away to a vanishing point in the haze of distance. Here we turned westward, and as we looked back at Cockburn's railway station, railway fettlers' homes, its store and pub, we found the small settlement had raised itself above the plain as if on stilts. The dancing, refracting heat waves rose from the ground to distort and even dismember Cockburn. If it had risen much higher it would have become a mirage in the sky.

It was natural that any strange, atmospheric phenomena should centre on that cluster of buildings; for it was the only prominent mass of any substance existing between the enormous baking void of earth and sky. Caught between the flat unending plain under the grilling sky, I could imagine this small huddled settlement attracting the lightning and catching the brunt of the dust storms that blew up suddenly in that wilderness.

As we looked back, a long steam-train crossed the landscape. Its puny wooden carriages became immense waggons against the sky and the wheels which connected it to earth were large and spindly. We watched it for a long time, fascinated. Then we turned our cameras on to it and filmed it, and the scene we secured suggests a new motif for cinema dramatics. We kept our cameras turning until all that was left of the express to the capital city of South Australia was a black puff of smoke on the horizon far to the south.

We had entered through a mighty door to the oldest land in the

## *Walkabout*

world—the land of the vast inland sea of the Cretaceous Era—the doorway to the northern deserts of South Australia and to the dead heart of our continent. The deserts of these areas and the pattern of salt lakes are divided by the Flinders Range, which extends almost from Adelaide to Lake Eyre and contains in its rocks the best developed examples in the world of the coral-like sponges called *Archaeocyatha*, dating back some 500,000,000 years.

All animal and plant life came stepping down from the sponges and tripolites. First, the fish; then the amphibians, the reptiles, ferns and cyads. All these can be found either fossilised in the rocks of the mountains and hills of this country or, like the diprotodons, deep below the surface of the shrub steppes and salt lakes; or like the plesiosaurus (fish lizard) of cretaceous times, opalised in the sandstones of the old sea beds.

That something took place deep down in the bowels of the earth to change the land from glaciers of ice to burning mountain and plain, is not hard to imagine because the land looks old and worn, and with temperatures ranging to 120 degrees it is easy to understand the ending of the days of the glaciers and the adaptation of the land and all living things to the intense heat and scanty rainfall.

This is the land of the ten-inch average annual rainfall, and a land where there are four hundred square miles and more to every permanent dweller. We had entered a land, not so much of peoples, but of individuals.

It was nearing midday, so we found ourselves a clump of sandalwood trees and bullock bushes, boiled the billy and had lunch. Then we lay on our mattresses in the small shade of these trees, as guests of the purple plain, and rested. The sweet smell of the billy fire wafted an incense of smouldering sandalwood and dry acacia, and wild bees still brought summer to our ears. All about us were the salt-bush plains, glistening white under the midday sun, and relieved in monotony of tone by the pastel patches of blue bush.

There were a few ants about, but we had looked over our piece of ground first to see what species were inhabiting the place. If there had been large black or red bull-dog or soldier ants, we would have moved on—but here we just had some very hard-working little red and brown fellows, who would not bite us unless molested and even then could not have hurt us.

## *Into the Desert*

We had travelled sixty miles westward from the Silver City, and were now well out in the land to which those hardy settlers had come when they were beaten by the long dry seasons closer in. They came almost with nothing and often had to live with the aborigines to exist at all. They trapped wild dogs for a living, and took droving and boring and fencing contracts with the big bosses; cattle kings like James Tyson and Sid Kidman, or from the big pastoral firms like Elder Smith, until they could save and take up land so remote and with such small rainfall, that no one else wanted it.

<sup>4</sup> We were eighty miles south of Lake Frome, the first of the string of great salt lakes which had held the explorers back, and our maps were almost as sparse looking as the country, dotted with interesting names, Kalabity, Boolcoomata, Curnamona, and Coondappie—all sheep stations.

One of the first men to take up land round and about Lake Frome battled along with the blacks and one white mate, and what these two men didn't learn about the land of the salt lakes was certainly not worth knowing. They ran sheep and cattle on these lands; they lived in a rough bough shed homestead and dug themselves rooms deep underground in which they sheltered and stored their food from the heat and hurricanes and dust storms of summer. They sheared the sheep in rough bough sheds and yarded them in sapling yards. They took their wool out by horse dray or packed it out on camels. They sold what they could and bought nothing that they could grow or make for themselves.

Great camel camps had been founded for the building of the overland telegraph line across the continent, and gold and copper finds had been made not far away, so they caught and broke the camels that ran wild; carried mutton and beef to the mining-fields, and later to the camps of men in the desert who built the first railways to Broken Hill and Oodnadatta. When the seasons were good they gathered and dried the native quondongs (wild apples) so that when times were bad they had a staple fruit diet along with kangaroo meat.

The true story of what the aborigines meant to these men will never be told—for the abos showed them how to find water where it seemingly didn't exist; the true levels of the flood waters; where not to build their rough homesteads, and how to live off the sparse bushes and

## *Walkabout*

wild fruits of the land. When the aborigines showed these first defeated and poverty-stricken white men how to exist on the purple plains they had signed their own death warrant. The days of the great Dieri Tribe were then numbered.

We were almost one thousand miles from Sydney, and still we had not met one single, full-blooded aborigine. Yet his names and words were all about us in lonely homesteads, in scant watercourses, and in the bushes and trees. There were trees with names like Mulga, Gidyea and Boree, and bushes called Quondong and Yarran and Mingle.

When the white men found the waters, they logged them in wherever possible, and crude water-whips were built to raise the buckets or skin bags they used as dippers. Often camels and oxen worked the water-whips, but sometimes native men and women did the job.

That these pioneers, in sheer ignorance, raped and destroyed most of the land in order to succeed, where so often they had failed before—this we know. That many of them made great wealth, we also know; and some failed and never rose to try again—only because by then they were too old or too ill. I thought about that man who first came to the country about Lake Frome, with one white mate, and fell with his horse one day smashing both his legs. He had the aborigines lift him into the saddle, then he rode home to his mate, and the aborigines cut sapling splints, and sitting on the floor of his home, he laced both his legs into these rough splints and set them himself. Later his legs, which of course were set badly, were twisted and misshapen, but he walked and rode about his large and ever-expanding sheep country—to a ripe old age.

These are the things worth remembering—the courage of the men who deliberately went to the lands which had been condemned. They went to areas which were regarded as being the worst lands in Australia, and the stations they founded are among some of the greatest stations in the land today. These men have shown the way and have buried the myth of the deserts for all time. We know today that there is little in Australia that can't be put to man's good, and even turned to great wealth. This is something that will be learned, I hope, from this long journey across Australia.

I turned to look at Elsa and saw her sitting up and nursing one of those quaintly hideous little horned lizards in the palm of her hand.

## *Into the Desert*

"Where did you find him?" I asked.

"He was just sitting in the sand under this bush, licking up the little black ants as they came hurrying down a long stem—he was half in the sand and when I went to pick him up he tried to bury himself."

My mind went swiftly back to our honeymoon, thirty years ago, when we went out camping in the Great Divide, and Elsa was really terrified of insects and little animals and especially lizards. And, here she was now picking up the ugliest little lizard in the world.

"Isn't he a wonderful little fellow?" she said, holding him close to her eyes. "He's got the cutest little face—so dissipated looking."

Harry moved up with the camera and we spent the next half-hour taking big-lens pictures of the little horned lizard. We looked with the lens right into his face as he winked at us. His eyes look out through deep, slanting grooves from under heavy, overhanging brows. He has spikes like a little rhinoceros, and these spikes protrude from his body as well as from his head. He's really a very diminutive cross between a crocodile and a frilled lizard with knobs on, and as he lay full length on Elsa's hand he was a little more than five inches in length.

"I'm quite sure he'd terrify any small creature twice his size," Elsa said, as she turned her hand slowly round in front of the camera to enable the lens to be focused on him from every angle. "Yet if you look right into his eyes you'll see he has quite a benign expression." She held him quite still while Harry, with the camera, now on a tripod, focused for a really big close-up—one that would fill the whole screen.

Harry turned to me: "Have a look at this, if he opened his mouth now I could get what they call the perfect tonsil shot!" I looked through the camera into the sleepest eyes I had ever seen on an animal. He appeared perfectly relaxed and quite fearless. I examined him closely. There is no surface water except that to be found in the man-made dams, so this small inhabitant of the arid salt-bush area was adapted for survival by carrying behind his head a tough skin pouch for water storage. In addition, his body is grooved and serrated in order to catch the dew. His appearance alone tells us we have entered an ancient land.

Elsa returned this reminder of the reptilian age to his cool hideout under the bush and we packed our vehicles and drove out from the shelter of our small trees, on to the hot salt-bush plains. Although

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we were moving slowly from summer to winter, the country through the day still sweltered under a burning sun. The earth was still radiating heat and forming white mountains of cumulus cloud which bunched themselves high in the sky. The heat haze across the plain had restricted the area visible to our eyes and the atmosphere was so affected by the heat that once again objects only a short distance away became grotesquely distorted. A fence loomed out of the haze, the first fence we had seen for more than twenty miles. Then a gate showed up in fantastic fashion: like the settlement at Cockburn, it seemed to grow larger and be suspended above the ground. As we approached the giant gate, it became connected with the earth, but was shaking, moving and swaying as visible waves of heat swept along the whole fence, constantly displacing it.

I decided to try to photograph this whole effect, and as we slowed down to a stop the gate became suddenly clearer and smaller, and across the plains behind the gate a sea of water spread with high hills coming to join it. But before reaching the water's edge, these hills became dissociated with the earth and seemed to hang in the air.

Harry drew his vehicle alongside ours and called to me: "We must be coming into the Kalabity country, and this must be the Devil's Sea." We both unrolled maps and studied our position, and my rough map showed the fence running across the road and had the words "permanent mirage" marked in plainly westward of the fence. This was the permanent mirage called the "Devil's Sea". We drove through the fence and set the cameras up carefully on the tripods. So many people had told us that we could not successfully photograph a mirage.

As we set the cameras up, a small flock of sheep moved away from us towards the shimmering waters of the mirage. The heat of the early afternoon struck down at us unmercifully; heat waves danced just fifty yards ahead and the wool on the sheep's back seemed to be moving. The whole world in front of us was being displaced by radiation from the hot ground.

We tried our wide-angle lens on the cameras, and the whole mirage seemed to fall back for miles. We ran just a few feet of film through the cameras and then started to work with our larger lens. The very large lens only accentuated the heat haze so greatly that the distortions were completely destroying. But a three-inch lens did the trick. It

## *Into the Desert*

held the whole sea to its place on the plain—even showing the reflections of the trees in the water.

With our Aeroflex camera one can view through the actual lens while photographing. It was an uncanny scene, made more strange when the sheep which had left us moved into our scene and walked across the water. As it proved afterwards, we actually captured that scene of the shimmering mirage on our celluloid and it was televised successfully in the third feature of our series entitled "Outposts".

As we approached the "Devil's Sea", it literally kept stepping backwards from us, shimmering all the time, until it became smaller and smaller, and then in one swift "dissolve" it was gone. The tall hills in the back that had reached for the waters of the lake were nothing but small undulations with tall clumps of blue bush. They had been accentuated and brought to mountain size by the effect of the heat of the sun and the heat of the floor of the plain upon the atmosphere.

It could be that the permanence of the "Devil's Sea" upon this one area in the hottest summer months was the reflection in the sky of a far inland lake or billabong, and then by further reflection it was placed upon this piece of hot, flat country.

The mirage was marked on the rough map sketched for me in Broken Hill—it proved our bearings. We knew that we were now within the country of the large Kalabity sheep run—a tough piece of country in a dry time, because the waters underground were scarce and uncertain south of the Salt Lake. But in good seasons Kalabity was rich in salt bush and blue bush, and many herbs good for sheep grew there, like the wild portulacca and shepherd's purse and wild barley.

All this land south of lake Frome is tricky to manage, and only the men who know its vagaries and understand the meaning of the winds and the changing cloud shapes in the sky—only the men who have learned the value of the different grasses and their times of seeding, the amount of grazing to which they can be subjected, and the incidence of the rains—these men only can hold the lands together here and prosper.

With the waning afternoon the animals of the land came out to feed. Old-man kangaroos came bounding along beside us and others came racing across our path. Others stood up, to their full seven feet, balancing backwards on their heavy tails, to watch us pass. At one

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time a flock of emus broke through a line of galloping kangaroos—one emu collided with another and both fell together in a cloud of white dust. Then we passed into an area of tall green bushes, all aflame with golden flowers. Then into clumps of turkey bush, and out across degenerated land, destroyed mostly by over-grazing—long stretches of scalded earth, dry and crumbling with the remains of useless secondary fodder, now loose and tumbling about the great plain in “roly poly” form.

We made camp just off the track upon a hard, scalded piece of earth, surrounded by large stands of salt bush and blue bush. There was no sign of a creek or a soak or of an earth tank, nor were there galahs or corellas feeding on the plain. There was no water, so we depended upon our canteens and water bags.

Sometimes when we camped beside water, our nights could be terribly disturbed by animals coming to drink; but out here on the plain we spent a most peaceful night. It was a beautiful night of moon and stars where the wide, clumped world of salt bush became a vast engraving of silvered light and shadow. We pulled our bunks out from under our tarpaulin to lie under the stars and as our camp-fire dwindled to a heap of golden coals we drew the small eiderdowns about us and slept as we had never slept for years.

Next morning the heat of the sun wakened us as it bit at us from across the horizon. We were well into the morning when we woke, later than we had planned, so the fire was stirred up and the billy put on in double-quick time. I took a small canteen of water well out on to the plain, where Elsa had found a wonderful bathroom between two mountainous clumps of blue bush, and surrounded by the shrubs with the golden flowers.

The early morning was full of exotic scents from wild flowers and aromatic bushes. But there were no bees, and few birds, so evidently we were still some distance from an earth tank. Elsa looked as though she was going for a dip at Brighton or Bondi Beach as she strode away from our camp in her bath-gown, swinging a colourful towel and singing happily.

As we travelled once again along the track through Kalabity, kangaroos and emus raced beside us and eagle hawks and crows flew back across the sky to visit our camp-fire. We have often been asked







## *Into the Desert*

whether we believe that animals really think—rather than depend upon blind instinct. We have learned to respect the ability of all animals and birds to think, particularly birds. Those eagles and crows for instance had watched our progress since the day before, and they were particularly interested in the smoke of our fire as it presented two possibilities to them: one that is the most common, that we had used our fire to cook things, something of which might still remain if they hurried; and the other and rarer possibility that we might have set light to some tree or grass. This would mean lizards and marsupial mice and even grubs being smoked out into the open from a burning tree or bushes.

An earth tank showed up, but it was without a windmill. As we approached it we crossed large drains, now in disuse, which stretched for miles away to low purple hills in the distance. Its tall earth banks sloped easily to the ground, so we ran our vehicles up on to the broad rim of the dam and looked down into a tank as dry as the driest claypan. The earth floor of the tank gaped at us with horrible scars—great open cracks in the mud, long since dried, and the bleached bones of some animal that went to drink of its last waters.

We heard the drone high up in the sky of some large aeroplane on its way north-westwards—no doubt bound for the town called “Alice” in Central Australia.

An hour later we saw a fence on a heavily shrubbed and timbered plain. It met us and ran parallel to our road for some miles. Immense kangaroos raced along on the other side tangling themselves with its wires. This led us to a large earth tank with two windmills, one some distance behind the other. The whole arrangement of earth-works and mill structure stood out mountainously on the flat plain, a purple line of hills skirted the horizon to the west. The first windmill was derelict and the great earth tank dry. We motored along a well-worn track on the rim of the dam and found that it was connected with a second large dam with a windmill working and turning noisily before a slight wind. Bullock bushes and clumps of acacia and turkey bush filled the valleys between the two earth tanks and straddled across the various tracks that came to the dams.

A deserted galvanised-tin hut sat farther round between the two dams, and the second and taller dam being too high and difficult to

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ascend, we kept to the track. Beyond this hut another well-worn track came to join ours, which now skirted round the larger earth tank. As we turned the last corner to the north, we suddenly found ourselves face to face with a little white pisa homestead which was a living thing. A great water-pipe ran down from the dam to the home, and a woman looked up from her task of hoeing in a very green vegetable patch. We pulled up and as she stood looking at us we had quite a shock.

Why? Because she was the image of Margaret Rutherford, who at this time was actually out in Australia and performing at the Elizabethan Theatre in Sydney.

## *Keepers of the Well*

WE sat staring stupidly. After miles of uninhabited country, any human figure was surprising—but this! Then the woman spoke, and it was not—of course—Margaret Rutherford.

"My husband's over there," she called, pointing to an outhouse. She was evidently the wife of the keeper of the well, a wiry little man of about fifty or so, who came over to us at that moment. He was dressed in faded dungarees, military sweater and an Armoured Corps beret.

I asked if we were on the right track for Wirralpa.

"So far," he replied. "If you go out that gate over there past the 'dead finish' tree and take the middle track you'll be right enough. It's just about ninety miles from here."

I thanked him, and feeling curious about the sort of life he and his wife led, asked him whether he had any children who were pupils of the School of the Air, as we were going to film them.

"No, we've no kids. Just me and my wife here. I'm the boundary rider. I look after the mill and the dam—ride the fences and keep the drains in repair. It's got pretty dry here now and the water's running low, so we've got the sheep right down to two thousand in my paddock now."

"How big is your paddock?" I asked.

"Just about on twenty thousand acres," he replied. "We're giving every sheep about ten acres at present. If they hadn't put nearly eighty thousand sheep over this country years ago, we'd still have all the good grasses, but the water's very poor—can't depend on the bores—they run a bit dry—some die out altogether and where the ground's spongy underneath the casings sometimes fall in. That old dried-up tank fifteen miles back on the road for instance—the whole country's full

## *Walkabout*

of them. Will ye have some tea?" he added. "It's just about time for smoke-oh. Come and meet the wife."

I turned and found that Elsa was already deep in conversation with the dam-keeper's wife, who was proudly showing her the tremendous spinach she had grown.

A lazy wind tempted the groaning windmill to turn slowly. It wasn't quite time for the billy to boil and Mrs. Boundary (we called her that because we never recorded her proper name) would have to listen-in to the Flying Doctor routine medical and to the telegram session, so Elsa decided to stay with her while Harry took a filming record of the homestead and the dams, and I accompanied Mr. Boundary to the top of the large homestead dam.

We looked down about fifteen feet to the slab of dark green water and I was surprised to see a number of ebony-black water hens with light red beaks, scurrying across the water and over the far bank, to disappear into some thick bushes.

"Those are my wife's pets," he said.

"Where on earth have they come from?" I asked.

"Well, it's like everything else," he said. "In dry times everything makes for water and of course the only water in this country is in the dams. Birds like these sometimes drop in from the skies as they pass on their migrations. Those birds might have come a thousand miles down from the flood plains in the Territory, or they could have come up from the swamps in Victoria. We've had them here for years—they breed here now, down in those bulrushes in the drain over there. My wife comes up and feeds them every day; some of them eat out of her hands."

"They came in wild and in time you tamed them?" I asked.

"Most of the wild things can be tamed, once you can get their confidence," he replied.

We walked on up to the highest point on the wall of the dam, and looked out over a heat-washed sea of plain as far as the eye could see. In the background the windmill creaked and groaned. He waved his hand across the scene. "I can see most of my world from here," he said. "Those blue hills away to the west are the hills this side of the Flinders Range. Do you see the long drains running out from this dam?" I nodded. "Well, they run out for thirty-five miles to drain

## *Keepers of the Well*

them when it rains, and bring the water right down here to the dam; it's the reservoir for a tremendous piece of country".

It was an oasis, this home of the boundary rider and his wife. A pool of water beneath tall skies with the horizon falling away from the world, or so it seemed from where we stood. Green patches of native fuchias and turkey bush, and the muddy patches below the walls of the dam where the water hens lived and nested, were also to be seen. We walked down the long, sloping bank to the loose sand patches and moved through a small park of native shade trees.

Mr. Boundary stooped to the ground and pointed out animal tracks in the soil, showing me where kangaroos had dragged their tails, and the splayed footmarks of the emus. There were twisting tracks of snakes and lizards and the most delicately woven tracks of beetles and insects with many legs. It was plain to see that every living thing for miles must at some time come to this earth tank to drink.

I moved under the shade of a native bush and he spoke to me quickly, warning me not to sit down there. "The kangaroos sleep there a lot through the heat of the day," he said. "Sometimes at night they sleep there, too, and the ground and bushes are covered in small animal ticks. We might have to send for the Flying Doctor if you get one of those in your head". He picked something up from the ground on a stick. It was a fat, hairy grub. "I don't like the look of this," he said.

"What?" I asked, as I squatted down beside him. "This wide brown band on this hairy grub—it's too wide. That means a dry winter and we've had a long, dry stretch already." This was the strangest thing I'd ever heard!

"Everything points to dry weather," he went on. "The spiders that build in these rushes are well inside their webs. The sound of the aeroplanes seems farther away when they pass. The clouds and the birds are all flying high, and we get no smell from the dam and the trees at night. When it's going to rain this dam smells to high heaven." I asked him why.

"Well, there's a high pressure in dry weather which holds the earth smells down. When the air becomes humid and the pressures are lessened, the smells come free from the still waters and the ground."

Something came to life quite suddenly in a bush at the back of us, and the dust impregnated with the musty smell of kangaroos showered

## *Walkabout*

all over us. Then we heard the thuds of an old-man kangaroo as he hopped away, and two other 'roos on the flat below us, hopped away out on to the plain.

Mr. Boundary laughed: "That's one of the old greys from the hills. He must have sensed our presence in his sleep. We've had a whole family of them here right through the summer. My wife knows them pretty well—has a name for each of them. By rights I'm supposed to shoot all the 'roos that come round, and when they get too thick I must reduce them. I don't like shooting animals that come to our dam. You see, this is my wife's world—this and the people who talk on the air to each other every day. She sometimes comes and sits out here in the cool of the afternoon and even my dog won't chase the 'roos." He pointed down to a grey heap of shells, all lying opened and bleached on a mound of sand. "See those? Every year when the dam gets low a marsupial rat comes and picks up the mussels in the mud of the dam. Then he drags them out on to that hot sand and the sun heats the water in the mussel and makes it open its shell for air. The rat sneaks out then and enjoys his meal without any effort."

A cowbell rang at the other side of the dam and a woman's voice called: "Smoke-Oh".

While Charles had been out with Mr. Boundary, I was taken into their cool home and seated in an old rocking-chair beside the western door—the door which led out to the world of blue bush and mirage. Through the door I saw an immense carpet of bright scarlet Sturt desert peas, purposely planted and carefully cared for. Never have I seen a more wonderful flower; a wickedly beautiful thing which belongs only to these vast central deserts of Australia, and named after the great explorer who discovered the land, cursed it, and disbelieved it, and then learned to understand it only as he eventually stumbled away from it all, broken and blind.

This waxen scarlet flower, with its large, black, ebony centre, spreads two long scarlet-cloaked arms and stands like Mephistopheles, in all his satanic splendour. It grows along the ground, drawling in clusters, which trail and search the ground for moisture like an octopus. Harry was sitting outside with his camera in the shade of the lean-to, busy focusing on a specially arranged clump of Sturt peas.



## *Keepers of the Well*

The story of the wells and dams with windmills, and their keepers, is so much the story of this country, that Charles and Harry planned to photograph every detail of these dams and the things that exist and happen all about them. The ant and the food it carries from some desert bush; the view a lonely woman sees eternally framed by a doorway; a bird that builds its nest in some peculiar fashion to shade it from the sun, or to protect it from the destroying dust storms; the crude stone oven where the woman bakes her bread.

I looked out to a scene that this woman must have sat and watched and mused upon a thousand times. On the other side of the house the windmill turned painfully. At the end of the long living-room there was a wonderful old fireplace, made for log fires in wintertime, and I could imagine just how cold it soon would be out on these plains.

It was time for Mrs. Boundary to tune in for the Flying Doctor session. She had an old model transceiving set, with a large and rather clumsy set of dials, and under her manoeuvring it was soon spluttering with static, and odd voices came crowding in from a wide world—voices shouting their call-signs, and then the voice of the Flying Doctor choosing his first case. The Doctor was speaking to his patients from an aeroplane high in the sky, as he flew to a patient at a tiny settlement called Innaminca, a long way north of the Silver City.

As I sat in my rocking-chair, I came swiftly into unseen contact with all the peoples scattered over more than one hundred thousand square miles. We passed from the medical calls as the doctor prescribed for his patients while he travelled through the sky, to the telegrams in and out of this country, and then on to the Cockatoo or Galah session, where all the various outposts give their news to each other.

We were not sure of our bearings the day before, but I was astonished to hear about ourselves from some outpost. A man's voice said: "The Chauvels took in eight gallons of petrol at Boolcoomata and travelled on through the five-mile paddock on the track to Wirrialpa."

Somebody called Barney Hassen had returned to Frome Downs. A Mrs. Babcock had had her baby in Adelaide (600 miles away) and would be motoring through Kalabity in about ten days' time, and would like to stay with Mrs. Boundary. Mrs. Boundary waited her opportunity, and had to shout to make herself heard, saying how much she would look forward to having Mrs. Babcock and her baby. The din

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was terrific. The whole world seemed to be crowding in upon our little outpost—at least the creaking, plunging windmill had been drowned for a while.

Wirrialpa wanted to know if anyone had seen the Chauvels, as they were expected there today. This made me sit up and take notice. It would be dreadful to arrive there late at night when they were expecting us earlier.

Poor old Tom Kennedy had broken his leg when out mustering sheep and will be picked up late in the afternoon by the Flying Doctor and taken to hospital in Broken Hill. The doctor will set his leg and stay overnight at the station.

Then a woman's strident voice called: "If anyone wants to see the doctor he will see them at the homestead that night, and the doctor would like to see them all before midnight. He would be able to pull any teeth that need extracting, and if Mrs. Friberg could get in as far as the 'Twenty Mile' and bring the baby, the doctor could see her before flying away in the morning."

A name that sounded like Ted Marsden came on the air, advising all married boundary riders or well sinkers to stay at their homes until the police from Broken Hill had found the whereabouts of a cook who went mad in a mustering camp north of Benagerie—he could be dangerous. The cook was dressed in blue dungaree trousers with a black sweater and was travelling in an old Ford car. He had plenty of petrol and a .303 rifle and some ammunition.

Toby Williams, the hawker, had left an outpost called Yunta and would be passing "Dead Finish" tank, and would be at Acacia tank on the Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday of the following week. As usual he would have everything from pain-killer to bobby pins, all the latest "Whodunnits", and other paper-backs.

Mrs. Boundary cut out from the cockatoo session after she had heard what she wanted, switched the transceiving set off and hurried to put the billy on.

The old creaking windmill then came into its own again, and as the heat of the advancing day set upon the land the sound of hawks and crows became clearer.

I was glad when the billy boiled because the folks at Wirrialpa were expecting us and we had another ninety miles to go.

## *Keepers of the Well*

Mrs. Boundary was such a neat, trim person, although heavy in build, so like dear Margaret Rutherford, with a swift turn of humour and the kindest chuckle. I was anxious to find just how a woman like this, so alone and so cut off from everything, could adapt herself to the days on end when the wide world would be hers alone.

I had spent an hour with her, one of the noisiest hours of my life, and then I knew that her life was full to the brim. She rushed into her kitchen to look at the wild quondong jam that was brewing on the fire. She would be on the air again at midday with messages from us to Wirriapla, and baking bread in the afternoon.

Then Charles came in with Mr. Boundary and told me all about the wild things that were also part of this woman's life—the water hens she fed in the afternoons and the kangaroos she had named after friends, and knew by sight. And Mr. Boundary took Charles to a wall of the living-room where large weather charts hung on the walls, giving wonderful photographic pictures of various cloud formations. It was his job to keep a day-to-day chart of the weather, the temperature and barometer readings, the nature of cloud formations and the direction and force of the winds. He would note the clear days and the cloudy days, and when it rained he would measure the rain. When he was away out "riding the run" as they say of a boundary rider, his wife would do the work for him and this daily information would all be supplied early each morning to the Flying Doctor base in Broken Hill.

This country was held together by these outposts and the information they supplied, and the managers on the head stations always knew the state of the lands upon which they ran their sheep and judged the right time to muster and sell—to rest the country or stock up more heavily. It was important that the good grasses were allowed to come to seed, not only for their perpetuation, but for the grain they held and which when the grasses died, the sheep would find mixed with the soil of the land.

We were about to say good-bye when a "willie willie" swept round the house. Mrs. Boundary hurriedly closed the door facing the dam. We heard the whirlwind racing across the yard and raining rubbish and tins and sticks on the roof.

"You should be out here when the big dust storms roll in from out west," she laughed. "They black the sky out and even though we close

## *Walkabout*

up everything, and put sacks and hessian over any cracks—we scoop the dust up by the bucketful when it's all over. It gets into everything."

We hoped she wouldn't be worried by the news of the mad cook. "Oh, they'll find him in a day or so," she replied. "Everybody will be looking for him. Although it's a big country, nobody gets very far here without everybody knowing. Already people over thousands of square miles know that you bought eight gallons of petrol at Boolcoomata yesterday, and you should be at Wirrialpa tonight. Later today they'll know you've been here. We see and hear all," she added, as we shook hands and said good-bye.

The lonely figures of Mr. and Mrs. Boundary became smaller and more blurred as our vehicles stretched the distance between us. Beside me Elsa sat clutching an armful of giant silver beet—a parting gift from Mrs. Boundary,

An hour or so later we passed through Erudina. This was a fine homestead, standing on high stumps, beside the beautiful Wilpenna Creek, which flows down from the four-thousand-foot heights of St. Mary's Peak in the Flinders Range to empty into Lake Frome, which was only thirty miles from this homestead.

We have used the words "flow" and "empty" because one uses these words when talking about rivers and creeks. Like all the other water-courses out here Wilpenna Creek would only flow and empty after the big storms once or twice a year, or sometimes once or twice in every two years.

The name of this sheep-station "Erudina" was marked in great black letters along the white galvanised roof of the big all-purpose building which ran the full length of the homestead yards. This is done to guide those flying across this country. We bought petrol here and they told me that young Johnnie Fargher at Wirrialpa had been expecting us all day and had a horse already saddled for me to ride.

Our track led down the red gashed banks of the Wilpena, and twisted for a while in and around the rows of beautiful river gum trees. These trees don't grow to a great height, but the young ones are pure white and slender, and the older ones have immense white trunks and gnarled and twisted forms—not grotesque, but quaintly beautiful.

Then a land of beauty opened before us, which perhaps because of

## *Keepers of the Well*

its splendour we called Pandora's Valley. This was a land that Sturt the explorer, must have missed. There is an aspect of wild nature across this white land that has a beauty and a charm peculiarly its own. We had entered a land of infinite, haunting colour, which spread before us in mounds of blue bush and rolling downs of flowering shrubs and bushes, with pure white ghost gums, emerald-green shrubs and silvered mulga, more silver than we had ever seen it. All this spread right away from the bonnet of our car to fold upon fold of reddened, sun-scarred hills, and beyond the purple rock scarps and grim chromatic valleys of the Flinders Range.

The road swung and we entered a field of tall, flowing spear grass, and tasselled grass of a kind we had never seen before. Parrots went screaming through the tree tops and fat sheep bounded and jumped away from us. Heavy black cockatoos, with their flashes of scarlet, also went screeching into the refuge of the trees.

A wild clatter of hooves striking the stones of a dry creek bed brought a wild stallion and his mares galloping about us in a wide circle for a while, then with their long tails and manes flowing in the wind of their mad galloping, they left us and headed for the purple hills.

We crossed another creek lined with river gums, then saw in the distance a small white castle on a rounded hill, and in the background the towering, time-worn mountains of red and purple—purple where the shadows fell, and red tipped where the late sun caught peak and mountain wall.

This was Wirrialpa, this castle on the hill. It was the home of Rex and Wynn Fargher, and a part of a great sheep-holding established by Wynn's grandfather in those hard days of the first settlers. Theirs is a white stone and plaster homestead set in a trim garden, high above the plains of salt bush and blue bush. To the east this sea of blue extends as far as the eye can see. To the south and the west are the white gummed watercourses and the peaks of the Flinders Range; to the north our vision was always encompassed by a rising plateau of mulga tree and blue bush. A tremendous shearing shed was the first of the outbuildings, then a signpost on the cross-roads to Wertaloona, Blinman, Frome Downs and Kalabity. Then a great gate and past the horse-yards to the men's quarters, the workshop, storerooms and harness sheds—across

## *Walkabout*

a wild-flower gully and up the steep track to the homestead on the hill.

Johnnie and his two smaller brothers were at the gate to meet us. He came forward and shook hands. "I'm Johnnie Fargher," he said, "and these are my youngster brothers."

Rex Fargher and his wife hurried out to join the group, and greeted us with the same easy directness as their son. Johnny piped in with: "We thought you'd be here early, I've had the horse ready for our ride all day."

"You didn't go off the track, did you?" Rex asked. "Didn't get lost in around Kalabity somewhere?"

"I'm afraid we've been working our passage across the country," I said, with some sense of guilt. "Coming out to film the children of the School of the Air is one thing, but filming the country they live in is another. So we've had to keep pretty busy with our cameras."

"Well!" Rex Fargher said. "You can give us three days I know, because we've just had a message from the Flying Doctor to say that he can't pick you up over at Wertaloona until Thursday night."

Mrs. Fargher's brother owned Wertaloona, which was another fifty miles to the north-east and right on the fringe of Lake Frome. Wynn Fargher is a wonderful young woman; a laughing, easy person to get along with and Rex complemented her as a partner in every way—friendly, considerate and kind. They both ran their spheres with enthusiasm and efficiency. It was a well-managed station and homestead.

The beautiful country was understood and well cared for; just as the homestead was modern in its comforts and warm with good family life. Everything at Wirriapla suddenly became so intimate, we felt we had known the people of this outback homestead all our lives.

It was good to sit down to a home-cooked dinner of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and delicious sweets, and we revelled in the "patching up" we could enjoy for some days before taking to the hard track again.

After dinner Johnnie Fargher came to say good-night, and Wynn went to hear the children's prayers. The evenings were cold and we yarned with Wynn and Rex beside a log fire in the lounge until quite late, over a last cup of tea.

## *Keepers of the Well*

Our quiet, softly carpeted room opened on to a stone verandah to the east and to the world of salt bush, bathed in moonlight. We sank into our big comfortable bed and listened to the thrashing sound of a windmill down on the banks of the dry creek and to a mopoke in the river gums. Then we slept soundly until dawn. When we woke we put on our gowns and walked out through the front garden gate to see the sun tipping the peaks of the Flinders Range with gold and red, and watched the flocks of snow-white corellas as they swept across the purpled depths of the mountain valleys the sun had not yet reached.

At ten o'clock—School of the Air time—we went to school that day at Wirrialpa. Right on the tick of ten we joined the Fargher children and heard Mrs. Gibb call her pupils together from her school-room in the Silver City. First Mrs. Gibb wanted to know if the Chauvels had arrived at Wirrialpa and if they had, would they please come on the air.

On our long journey out from Broken Hill we had been watched over all the time and our progress noted. This care did not only apply to us—every traveller on the road would be cared for in the same way.

Johnnie Fargher was at the controls and he handed me the microphone in readiness. Then Mrs. Gibb's voice spoke: "Mr. Chauvel if you are listening would you please let me know. Over to you." I took the microphone: "Good morning, Mrs. Gibb. We've had a wonderful trip to Wirrialpa and everybody is well here and if it is convenient to you we would like to film Johnnie Fargher's participation in the play tomorrow morning. Over to you."

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Chauvel. I'm so glad you had a good trip out. It will be quite convenient for us to stage a section of the play tomorrow morning at ten. I want to report that little Dan O'Connor hasn't attended school for two days and we believe that his father is busy moving his boring plant from Wertaloona Station to somewhere near Frome Downs—perhaps you can locate him through the station people. Danny is very keen to appear in your picture and so is another pupil of ours at Nepabunna."

I assured Mrs. Gibb that we would do all we could and that we hoped to visit Nepabunna with the Flying Doctor in a few days' time.

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Then while Harry made recordings, we sat back on the wide, shady verandah and listened to the School of the Air at work.

"Can any pupil tell me what a marsupial is? Over to you." Immediately we were drowned with the shouted call-signs from across the hundreds of miles of country—everyone wanted to tell what a marsupial was.

The following day was school day again for us, but this time the play, *What made the Animals Run*, came on the air, in which Johnnie Fargher played his role as the goat, and from an early hour there were great preparations. While we arranged our cameras in position, and our lighting of the Wirrialpa office with the transceiving set, Johnnie's mother dressed him for his part as the goat.

The finishing touches to Johnnie's makeup were done on the front lawn where our cameras filmed the fitting on of his costume. He was dressed from head to feet in a one-piece costume of hessian. On his head his mother had cleverly stitched two twisted billygoat horns and of course he had a short hessian tail.

At the appointed moment Johnnie took the controls and described his costume to the children scattered across the two hundred thousand square miles—right from the opal field of Andamooka on the other side of the Flinders Range to Pandi Pandi, five hundred miles away on the Queensland Border.

"It's a pretty good costume I think, Mrs. Gibb," he said, "and my mother has stitched on two billygoat's horns at the top of my head—Oh! no, I'm sorry, one billygoat horn and a ram's horn. You see we had a job to find another billygoat's horn, but it looks about the same. Over to you."

That afternoon I went riding with Johnnie at last. We rode down on to the plains and across the Wirrialpa Creek with the big white gums, and did some special cantering about for Elsa and Harry who had the cameras. In the late afternoon the children took us to see the well-kept graves of the first pioneers to come to Wirrialpa. They rested in a rustic graveyard under mulga trees, on a high knoll at the back of the homestead, the whole world of Wirrialpa spread below them.

The next day Rex and Wynn drove us deep into the ranges to the attractive copper mining town called Blinman, and we were amazed to find when we reached this point that just twenty-two miles to the



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west of us ran the famous Centralian railway upon which with our vehicles and equipment, just three weeks from this date we were booked to travel. But before that day we planned to fly another two hundred miles northward with the Flying Doctor to Lake Eyre, and travel right down through these deserts again across the lower part of the Flinders Range—to Port Augusta, the Port of Camels, and the centre of Australia's trans-desert railways.

On the last afternoon at Wirrialpa, we made radio contact with the people at Wertaloonā; they would expect us for dinner the next night and the Flying Doctor confirmed his projected arrival at Wertaloonā to tie with us.

We said our sad farewells to the people of Wirrialpa and I promised Johnnie I would come back to ride with him again some day.

We turned eastwards towards Lake Frome—took the road from the signpost marked "Wertaloonā" and soon our castle on the hill was a white smudge in the western haze, and we were losing ourselves and almost our way in clouds of white talc dust on the road to Wertaloonā.

### *The Man from Heaven*

WE threaded across dry plains of salt bush for a good twenty miles before running into the rough foothills which sprayed out from the Flinders Range, still running abreast of us to the west. We headed almost due north and past three dams with bores and lonely pumping windmills, and then entered a series of rock-ribbed, twisting ravines which led us into some of the roughest defiles I have ever taken vehicles through. The kangaroos were the biggest we have seen. More than seven feet tall, as they stood on the hillsides outlined against the sky, we could have been gazing upon the extinct *Macropus gigantiticus ticus*—the giant marsupials of the Tertiary Era.

Then leaving the rocky hills we breasted a rise to look down on a swathe of green plain, and in the distance a shimmering world of salt. This was Lake Frome, the easternmost member of the pattern of salt lakes. Our maps showed that we had reached the Tea Tree Point, which meant that we were facing the widest portion of the lake, about thirty-six miles from the east to the west. Its length is about sixty miles from Wilpena Creek in the south to Paralana Creek in the north.

The three lakes, Frome, Callabonna and Blanche are all linked together by joining creeks, and they form one side of the infamous horseshoe of salt lakes which extends into the desert for one hundred and fifty miles. The salt bush and blue bush grew in great hummocks about us, and seemed from where we stood, to grow considerably less in size as they spread away from our hill to meet the long line of salt in the distance. It is difficult to imagine this land, thick with trees and grass, and fringed with rain forest which spread from the feet of the great mountains—as it once was.

I tried to picture the free-swimming and ponderous Dinosaurs and the Diprotodons, each many tons in weight, wallowing in the mud





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of swamps right here before us. The herds of these monsters moving through great trees to feed upon the first of the world's grasses and herbs.

Vast changes have slowly taken place since the days when this region was only a small part of the inland sea and swamplands. In the words of the geologists, there have been deformative movements of the earth's crust, igneous upthrusts and inundations and submergences over a million years. Nothing really stands still in nature. There is always a perpetuation or a re-creation, and each year adds an imperceptible change in measurements of land and sea and climate. This land before us had changed from cold to temperate and then to heat. No doubt the change of climate played havoc with the Diprotodons, whose ranks each year thinned with the gradual drying up of the waters. Philosopher Leibnitz declared that the entire future of the world is contained in its present, completely planned in every detail. So, perhaps, instead of being so old that it is exhausted and dying this area is still busy shaping its distant future.

We turned our cameras upon the wilderness of Frome, and for the first time very closely studied and photographed both the salt bush and the blue bush. I believe that they are similar species to those of Iraq and Arabia. We found the blue bush growing in larger hummocks than the salt bush but both had great masses of rubbery leaves, like crochet work. Often when quite close up, the blue bush seemed the whiter of the two, but at a distance it turned to blue. Its leaf is very full of moisture, while the leaf of the salt bush looks as though it were coated with brine.

We packed our cameras, and rounded the point at the Tea Tree promontory. Tea Tree is an out-station homestead of the big sheep run called Wertaloona. As we moved in we found there were only two whitewashed stone houses, each deserted. But as we walked into all the rooms of the main homestead house we found them ready for use. We could have unrolled our swags upon stretchers in the bedrooms, swept the cement floors, opened the wide wooden windows to the far lake, blown a few cobwebs away and slept to the sound of the wind in the big pepperina trees and the slow turn of a windmill with its rudder tied tight against the wind. A large kerosene refrigerator stood in the kitchen, which was fully equipped with kitchenware,

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cutlery and crockery. The tanks were full of drinkable water, but there was no sign of anyone having used the homestead for some time.

We found later that Tea Tree was always standing ready for use by the drovers and stockmen when the sheep on that part of Wertaloona had to be mustered for shearing or drafting, or for delivery to the drovers. A large shearing shed of galvanised iron with well-built yards stood on the brow of the promontory, and near the main house was a stone outhouse, beautifully thatched. The thatched, stone house was like a small home in an English village. Some of the best artisans from England and Germany came to South Australia and stone houses and fences and thatched roofs can be found scattered over a thousand miles and more, from the wooded hills of the south to these deserts of the north.

I have often camped by myself in the Australian bush and felt desolate because of the mournful call of the dingoes, and the cry of the curlew; but nothing in this world would ever tempt me to spend a night alone at Tea Tree. Dreadful stories are told of the lake. How the great wilderness of Frome moans at night, far worse than any banshee, although it is nothing more than the passage of the night air sweeping across an immense area of heated salt. Perhaps there is a similar reason for the strange dancing "min min" lights of the aborigines, which dance and behave at times like the eerie phenomenon the sailors call St. Elmo's Light. Then there are the howling hordes of dingoes that follow the cattle tracks down the long string of water-holes, and cross this lake to change their diet from beef to mutton.

We have heard that nobody ever ventured far on to the floor of Lake Frome because of its treacherous subterranean "drag", and one man was said to have seen his bullocks sucked under, right before his eyes. Those who have lived about the lake all their lives, swear that when it has filled after the rains a tide comes in and recedes in complete harmony with the rise and fall of the ocean tides nearly two hundred miles away.

After resting through the heat of the day at Tea Tree, we headed out into the undulating hills along the track which ran parallel to Lake Frome, all the way to Wertaloona. Out among the brown, grassed hills, a falcon swept across our track, climbed high in the air and dived. It soared again and again. The falcon was using our vehicles as beaters;

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they often did this, diving on smaller birds which had been frightened from the grass by our approach. The falcon swooped again, this time striking and sending a little fat mulga pigeon falling headlong to earth. Then, with an amazing burst of speed, it caught the pigeon in its talons before it hit the ground. Then it flew away with its prey, low across the hills.

All through the day, snow-white cumulus clouds had built their castles in the sky. They were bunched in great balls of cotton-wool, very high. The cumulus is a safe cloud while it stays high from the earth and continues to billow. It only becomes dangerous when it builds great towering and single thunderheads and lowers its base close to the earth. On this afternoon, as the falcons swooped and climbed and dived, the white cumulus clouds formed a marching pageantry, and as we neared the mountains and Wertaloona a blazing sun sank between two white cloud-mountains, painting one with crimson and throwing the other into dark relief. Across our whole roof of sky, the smaller clouds went tumbling away in rolling mounds of pink. Away in the distance we saw a large white settlement on a plain. This was Wertaloona.

As we neared the station's airstrip, which was heavily covered in grass, we found the owner of the station, Bob Wilson, busy rounding up a mob of horses with his ultra-modern Cadillac. Then we heard the sound of a plane and knew that the Flying Doctor must be coming in to land. The horses were right across the landing-ground. They wheeled and raced madly in a wide circle with the Cadillac right on their heels. Along the sides of the airstrip there were rocks and small hillocks. There was no fence to be seen and one windsock only in a sea of grass marked the landing-ground.

Then for the first time we saw the doctor's plane, as it banked and flashed with the rays of the setting sun. The horses galloped straight towards us, the Cadillac hard on their heels. They swung past us in a cloud of dust just as the plane came down to land right where they had been.

The pilot opened his cockpit and waved to us. The door opened and Doctor Charles Huxtable clambered out. For those people who collect sunsets it would be worth their while to come a thousand miles for the sunsets in the land of great salt lakes, and particularly for the

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sunset that afternoon when the Flying Doctor arrived at Wertaloona. The sky was now quite crimson from the mountains in the west to the rim of the world in the east, and against this the doctor's plane was a beautiful bird of shining silver. The Red Cross of St. John, the symbol of help and mercy in this vast land, stood out plainly upon its tail-piece as if emphasising that the heavens in all their splendour had truly declared the Glory of God.

On this afternoon, Wertaloona was something of a beehive. Vehicles of all descriptions, from the heavy talcum-coated blitz waggons from the Andamooka opal fields three hundred miles away, to the sleek utilities from the neighbouring sheep stations of Balcanoona and Wooltana.

There were people from Copley on the Central Australian railway, and people from the hills of Angepena and Benbonyathe Hill. There were half-caste stockmen, babies and boring contractors; women expecting babies; children with skin rashes or sores on their legs. There were teeth to be pulled, sore eyes to be treated and inoculations to be given.

Poor, poor doctor. We watched him as he came smiling along in the casual, easy lope of a man of the west, who had plenty of time, and in truth was a man with no time at all. What is sixty years of age to a man with a mission, who is needed at some time or other by every man, woman and child, from the old stockman of eighty to the babe just born? What is age to a man running so free in the skies and upon a vast earth with no limitations? What is age to a man so nourished by love and affection?

Only the doctor himself could tell you, if he would only speak his heart. But he is a quiet, shy man, and would be the last to talk about himself. When the times comes for Charles Huxtable to take his last plane ride to a patient: when the time comes for him to hand in his medical records and the personal charts of his patients, and turn his back on this limitless land—then perhaps he will be old; then perhaps he will feel tired. But not until then.

We have seen him as he closed his little brown bag of tricks, in a station homestead at midnight, and smiled good night to his last patient for that day. He has paused as he passed us to look up and smile through a tragic tiredness, to say in his calm, kindly way: "Good night Elsa. Good night Charles. See you in the morning."



## *The Man From Heaven*

An opal gouger, his face all caked with fine white dust, looked up from under the blitz waggon he was repairing and called: "Good day, doc!" The people near the gate called or waved or tipped their hats as the doctor passed through the garden, to the door of the homestead. He greeted Bob Wilson and Mrs. Wilson and ourselves. "Looks like a night's sitting, Bob," he said. "How many are there altogether? Have you listed them?"

"There's twenty-six altogether," Bob replied. "You can run some of them through the crush pretty quickly."

"We were in cattle country now, as well as sheep, so we'd have to get used to cattle terms.

"I've got them drafted out a bit," Bob said, as he led the Flying Doctor out to the kitchen, which would act as the doctor's waiting-room and office, while the bathroom served as the surgery. Here local anaesthetic would be administered and swellings lanced and treated, and teeth pulled, and minor surgery carried out.

Mrs. Wilson had given all the womenfolk afternoon tea in the lounge and on the homestead's commodious verandah, and the white and half-caste stockmen and miners and gaugers, and even fettlers from the desert railway, had all enjoyed a meal out in the workmen's kitchen. The station's store was open and doing business. After seeing our rooms we were busy preparing for our journey deeper into the country the next day with the Flying Doctor.

I met the young manager from Balcanoona Station, who had only been out from England for a very few years. Always we meet these Englishmen and women, popping up in the most difficult places with the most difficult jobs. He spoke with a marked Oxford accent. "I wouldn't change my way of life now, old chap, for all the world," he told me. "They wanted to give me a place closer in, but once you've lived out here you just don't want to live anywhere else."

Just then a little fellow who didn't want his teeth drawn, came rushing out from the nether regions of the homestead with his mother close behind. Elsa was now nursing one of the babies and trying to help the mothers with their children. How useless a man can be and feel sometimes! All I could do was to help carry some of the women's luggage back to their cars and trucks, and some of them were too shy to let me help them very much.

## *Walkabout*

There was just one last faint glow of pink along the ridge of the Flinders Range as night set in. The electric lights went on in the house and headlights glared and swept the station yard, as families with whom the doctor had already finished shouted their last good-byes, and turned their vehicles out to the wilderness. Some would travel perhaps just twenty miles and boil the billy and camp for the night. Others would travel all night.

There were many who had come together for the very first time and many who were renewing old acquaintances. There were many also who had known each other only as voices on the air. The women had enjoyed themselves, regardless of aches and pains and anxieties. They had spoken of their operations—the times when the doctor had rushed them out by plane for the removal of an appendix in the big hospital at Broken Hill—the pride of exclusiveness that had come to one woman when the doctor told her that hers was the smallest appendix he had ever seen; and the feeling of personal accomplishment that had come to some of the young mothers, who had flown away to have their first babies. Cooking recipes were exchanged and tidbits of scandal passed around.

Night set in and dinner was put back to enable the doctor to finish extracting teeth, and it was planned that those people who lived at or close to Werralooona could see the doctor after dinner. The doctor's last extraction was the most difficult of all. His patient was the one lone full aborigine we have seen in this country to date, and he had a big back tooth to be extracted. These fellows are as tough as they come their teeth are of wonderful ivory and are embedded firmly in powerful jaws.

The aborigine fainted when he was given the needle, but recovered and sat quite complacently while the doctor tried to extract the tooth. But this was a herculean task—the powerful tooth refused to budge from the powerful jaw.

In the end, I believe, the doctor in order to gain a better purchase, had to lay the big aborigine on the floor of the bathroom and stand and pull from above him. All kinds of stories about the doctor's exploit permeated round about the homestead, and upon the successful extraction of that big aborigine's tooth the doctor called it a day and the homestead dined. But the doctor continued to see and attend to patients until late that night.

## *The Man From Heaven*

Each rising in the Australian bush is always a new delight. Dawn broke through the gold and pink scum of clouds beyond the line of trees which marked Big John Creek, and precisely at 6 a.m. a cow-bell was rattled harshly somewhere in the backyard and Wertaaloon came to life. Bob Wilson was up and about already, talking to his camp boss and setting his little army of men to work. Across at the horse yards, dust was already rising as horses were being caught and saddled. The camp boss would ride out on the run with some of his stockmen. A new dam was to be built and a pumping engine installed at the well beside the creek, and new drafting yards were being built somewhere near the Balcanoona boundary.

The pilot of the Flying Doctor's plane was already out on the airstrip, giving his plane its usual maintenance. Elsa joined me looking very rested. She put her arm through mine and said: "Let's take a brisk walk before breakfast—big steps and deep breaths at the same time." We stepped out beyond the homestead garden until we'd reached a small rise and could look back at Wertaaloon.

Long John Creek, which cut across the whole landscape was just across from the homestead garden. It is long and beautifully tree lined, rising somewhere amongst the lonely mountain peaks near Angepena cutting its way down through the mountains and across the long level of salt-bush lands to enter Lake Frome, like all the other creeks in this country.

We looked back at the homestead, now strikingly white in the early morning sun. A one-storied, deep-verandahed, stone house—something of a cross between an English country house and a Spanish hacienda. The outbuildings spread themselves everywhere in white plaster and paint, and galvanised-iron roofs. Large pepperina trees and slender spotted gum trees, and the eternal mulga were dotted across the settlement of the homestead consisting of the mens' quarters, the store, butcher's shop, saddler's shop, workshop, garages, and housings for electric light and refrigeration. Quite a settlement.

Harry hurried out to join us, followed closely by little Jane Wilson, and just then the second cow-bell rang for breakfast. All the way back to the house, Jane aged about nine, and dressed in shirt and jodhpurs and riding boots, babbled about her piebald pony—what a good little horse it was and how she was going out for her morning ride before

## *Walkabout*

school went in. First she would attend the School of the Air with her governess, from ten o'clock to eleven o'clock, and then have her correspondence lessons until twelve-thirty: then back again after lunch for another hour of schooling. Later she would be sent to a boarding-school in Adelaide, four hundred miles away by road or three hundred by air.

Although the half-caste kitchen girls had been busy since dawn, the homestead still had signs of the surgery and inoculations and extractions of the night before. The quiet, kindly doctor came to breakfast with a smile for us all, and very soon he had us all laughing at the human stories he had to tell of the mothers and their babies, or the items of gossip picked up.

Our arrangements for the day were all worked out at breakfast, as they generally are on a sheep or cattle station. Immediately after breakfast, we would take our cameras and fly with the doctor to the aborigine settlement of Nepabunna, where we would film the doctor giving the natives their Salk vaccinations and have little Eileen Hathaway re-enact over the air the announcement of her birthday, and her listening to the singing of the birthday hymn.

After filming and recording all this we would fly back to Werta-loona for lunch, and then toss our swags into the doctor's plane and take to the air for Lake Eyre and the famous desert homestead of Muloorina.

Nepabunna, which lies in the hills about thirty miles from Werta-loona, and also shares the banks of Long John Creek, was all "spit and polish" for the arrival of the Flying Doctor and little Eileen was all done up in long golden "Shirley Temple" curls and her Sunday best for her scene beside the wireless transceiving set.

All the aborigines seemed to be half-castes, who no doubt, took work where they could find it on the stations or with the drovers or carriers, or at some of the itinerant mining ventures in and about the ranges. It seemed that Nepabunna was a haven of a kind for the interbred remnants of old tribes that are now extinct. No doubt it was the home of many families whose children could gain some standard of education and the clearing-house for those seeking employment, or temporarily out of work.

It was set in a harsh land, and we felt a little sad for this one little

## *The Man From Heaven*

white student of the School of the Air. She was the daughter of the Superintendent and had plenty of playmates, but none of her own colour or race. Each of her half-caste companions were also in this position, because they belonged to neither the white race nor the black race.

The Flying Doctor inoculated them in lines: girls in one—boys in another; women and babies in one—men in another. A bustling hour was spent at Nepabunna before we took to the air again, and in a matter of seconds we were looking down on the settlement beside Long John Creek—the home of a people whose blood possesses the last traces of the fine old native tribes of Wialpi and Dieri.

Like the Quinbaya tribe of South America, which was completely wiped out by the Spanish Conquistadores in the sixteenth century, these aborigines of the northern deserts of South Australia have left no records or buildings or works of art; no tangible relics beyond a few woomeras (throwing sticks) and spears and stone axe heads, which lie in the Adelaide Museum.

Our plane followed the course of Long John Creek right back to Wertaloona. We lunched at Wertaloona and Bob Wilson told us that he was still trying to find the whereabouts of the O'Connor boring plant. Perhaps he would have some news by the time we returned from Lake Eyre. "The whole trouble, I believe, is that Danny O'Connor's father has got some pretty weak batteries and possibly hasn't had the chance to get them charged up," the doctor said. This was one time when somebody had "gone bush" because of two things: being off the tracks in a place where no roads go by, and having a run-down set of batteries.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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### *Clinic in the Clouds*

**I**N the heat of the early afternoon, we took our farewells of Werta-loona and made arrangements to stay over for another day on our way back from Lake Eyre to enable us to film the scenes of Jane taking her lessons from the School of the Air. Our vehicles were driven well under the protecting branches of the pepperina trees; our swags slung into the doctor's plane: then our cameras and ourselves, and without fuss we taxied and revved the engines and took to the air.

We banked easily and swung to salute the homestead by encircling it. This is a friendly custom of the outback. The slanting sun played tricks, reflecting light back to us—sharp, biting shafts of light from wing tips and fuselage. The air was stifling inside the little plane. I tried to look down at the homestead but was blinded by a flare of light from the polished metal of the wing of the plane.

I noticed Elsa unbuttoning the neck of her shirt. Harry stretched himself full length on the narrow hospital bunk, already set for a patient. I moved over to Elsa and at last we were able to get a good view of the earth beneath us. The little plane dropped and took our breath, and dropped again. We both laced our arms together and clung to our small seats. We were climbing swiftly against a roar of wind—climbing desperately to get above the hot earth. Werta-loona had become a speck below us. The door of the cockpit was open and our pilot sat at his controls with his shirt unbuttoned. The doctor removed his puckish Tyrolean hat from his head and set to work with pen and special writing-pad with letter-heads engraved with the winged insignia of the Royal Australian Flying Doctor Service.

He had to make up his medical report upon the patients of Werta-loona and prepare for his next medical session which he would "take" in the plane at three o'clock. He pointed to the country below and shouted, but the noise of the plane drowned everything. We looked

## *Clinic in the Clouds*

down and saw that we were passing about three thousand feet above Balcanoonna, which the man from England was managing.

Away to our right the salt floor of Lake Frome stretched as a sheet of white, to reach an almost heat-whitened sky. The only real blue in the sky now was right above us.

We followed the white line of Lake Frome until we crossed above the next cattle station, Wooltana. About fifty miles away into the haze to our right lay Lake Callabonna, to which place a great herd of Diprotodons had retreated with the drying up of the lakes and died, fluddled together in this death swamp, just as it has been recently recorded that a herd of hippopotamus have died in drought-stricken Lake Tanganyika. Complete specimens of immense Diprotodons have been unearthed at Callabonna and removed to our museums, and it is claimed that seeds found in the exact positions where their stomachs lay have proven the nature of their last feeding.

Our plane turned its nose to the bare and horribly grooved peaks and ridges of the Flinders Range. We rose more than another thousand feet in rough air-lifts. The doctor packed his writing things away and we strapped ourselves in as we lifted above the plateaux and fell in swift, frightening drops towards the canyons. Our little plane was like a bird, swaying and turning, rising and falling. Harry hung to supports above him.

Mount Painter, with its harsh and remote uranium field, lay on our starboard and out of the haze of the north rose Mount Fitton, where talc is mined. In fact Australia receives ninety per cent of all its talc requirements from a handful of men who work the talc mines of this lost world. Now lying like a huge grey crocodile beneath us at this point, the long Flinders Range comes to an end, petering out in what is the beginning of Sturt's Stony Desert. With an arm flung into the desert, it seems to claw at Lake Blanche with one broken talon of rocks.

Conditions in the air had flattened out and the doctor was writing again. I looked round at the interior of the amazing little plane and noted the oxygen equipment and the hot-water system and wash basin, medicine and instrument cupboards fitted into the tail of the plane. There is room for the pilot, the doctor, one stretcher case, a nurse and a relative of the patient. It must be remembered that if the doctor received an urgent call which required him to take on a stretcher

## *Walkabout*

case we would be bundled out with our swags and our cameras, wherever this should happen. We would have to fend for ourselves as best we could, until we could be picked up again. We were glad we had our swags.

The pilot looked back and pointed to the clock above his head. It was close on three o'clock and time to take the next medical. The doctor put his writing-pad away and picked up the headphones which are always hooked to the wall of the plane beside his seat. Harry hurried from his bunk and for the next five minutes we had a turbulent time setting up our camera and small reflectors to enable us to film a complete medical session in the air.

Elsa put on the spare headphones and sat close behind the doctor, out of camera range, so that she could record the script details of the scene. The doctor's voice fed back to a tape recorder which we also controlled beside the camera. The interior of the whole plane was only 183 inches long and its width where we sat was only 59 inches, its height 57 inches and today we look back and wonder how we recorded that scene and many others that we were to film.

The doctor called for the stations' call-signs. Only those requiring the doctor must come on the air. A wavering distorted babble of voices broke through the noise of the plane as a host of call signs came through. We could only hear four calls at all distinctly—8 MQ, the cattle station called Pandi Pandi three hundred miles from our position; 8 MZ, the cattle station in the sandhill country, called Quinyambie; 8 RW, which is Cawkers Well and 8 EM which is the call-sign of Murnpeowie, to which we were moving quickly now. This latter place was barely forty air miles from our position in the south at this time.

About ten station call-signs came crowding in. We wondered how the doctor could possibly distinguish any of the call-signs. But after calling for their signs a second time and telling all the stations the signals he had heard—only those which had been indistinct called their signs again, and although they were still jumbled to our ears, he clearly wrote all the call-signs down on his pad.

Then because we were approaching Murnpeowie and because of the advancing afternoon and urgent instructions he had for this station, he called "Murnpeowie first". This name is pronounced Mump-P-Owie.



## *Clinic in the Clouds*

The 8 EM call-signal came back clearly, and the doctor was quickly speaking to Murnpeowie. "Can you hear me, Murnpeowie? How many patients have you got? Over to you."

"Yes we can hear you plainly, doctor," Murnpeowie replied. "Everybody's well here. We have eight patients for Salk inoculation. Two babies, three children, and three adults. Did you pick up the Chauvels alright? We'll have afternoon tea ready for you at the homestead. Over to you."

"I heard you plainly, Murnpeowie," the doctor replied. "The Chauvels are with me. Thank you for afternoon tea. We have to make Muloorina before dark, so have very little time. I must ask you to have all the people out at the airstrip, I won't have time to go into the homestead and will have to inoculate everybody out at the plane. Have you heard me? Over to you."

"Yes, doctor, we've heard you. We'll have everybody out at the air strip. We'll take our afternoon tea out there, too. Over."

The doctor made contact with other outposts. We heard him talking to Moolawatana and to Yerelina and Umberatana, listening to all sorts of symptoms and prescribing the treatment. Sometimes he looked more like a doctor on horseback trying to speak through a microphone while the little plane swung and rolled, as it battled a heavy cross-wind, and caught the scorching afternoon sun hard upon its port side.

The country passed below, sad-coloured and monotonous, and just for one split second the utter destitution raised a small galvanised roof to catch and reflect back the sun's rays. The little patch flared like a morse signal. No doubt it was a boundary rider's hut beside a desert well or a pumping shed. Soon we were over Murnpeowie country and searching for the homestead. We dropped into pockets of air and cameras and reflectors and ourselves all crashed together between the seats. The pilot signalled back to us to strap ourselves in.

The country below us was a great plain again and as we lost elevation its detail became defined. No trees, only clumps of mimosa and salt bush. Then Murnpeowie showed up—a little settlement of stone houses and a few pepperina trees. There was nothing to break the sun, the wind, or the dust storms, and the only other feature besides the homestead was the long, dry watercourse, lined with sparse trees

## *Walkabout*

called tooncatchyin. Our maps showed that Tooncatchyin Creek ran into Koortanyaninna Creek, and that both, now married, found their end in the salt of Lake Blanche.

We banked and circled to salute the homestead, coming down low over the roofs. The doctor had asked us to be ready with our cameras to film the moment he slipped from the plane to set things up as time was so limited. So we strapped our cameras to our shoulders ready to start filming.

A long, sleek car was moving out from the homestead. We banked again and our pilot hurriedly lowered the landing-wheels. The red earth rushed to meet us and then we bumped and clouds of red dust formed a billowing wake. We came to a stop close beside a small group of people and we all seemed to bundle out of the plane together. There was a quick greeting between the doctor and Mrs. Napier the wife of the manager, and we were all hurriedly introduced. Everybody at Murnpeowie realised the urgency of our making Muloorina before nightfall, and how dangerous it would be to fly over this featureless country in darkness. There were no control towers or even beacons out here.

The doctor, with the aid of the pilot, spread a sheet on the wing of the plane which they weighted down with four red stones. The wing of the plane became the doctor's surgery table.

Three of the young children at the homestead, Robert, Max and Rex came forward to meet us. We got busy with our cameras and Mrs. Napier came forward to tell the doctor that afternoon tea would be ready in their big car whenever we wanted it; that a small primus would keep the billy boiling and that the freshly made scones were in a hot box in the car.

The doctor who was already inoculating one of the children looked up with that quiet smile and said: "If it's not too much trouble, we'll have tea when I've finished, if you don't mind, Mrs. Napier."

We were then introduced to Mrs. Dixon, the handsome young wife of an Australian stockman. As Sister Margery Harmes, she gained her nursing degree at the Ratcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, and is famous as the first nurse ever to give an injection of penicillin. She migrated to Australia some years ago and joining the Inland Mission's nursing staff, she came to nurse at the little hospital of Innaminka, which lies one

## *Clinic in the Clouds*

hundred and sixty miles north-east from here. Now she has made a home for herself and her husband at Murnpeowie.

Within just fifteen minutes all the inoculations were completed and consultations given, and we all moved to the spacious station-waggon, where we enjoyed one of our most memorable afternoon teas. The streamlined station-waggon had been turned against the sun, which was now much diffused by light fleecy clouds, and a light breeze from westwards over the desert helped to cool the latening afternoon. The tea was laid on the tailboard of the station-waggon. Scones from the hot box and butter from the station cooler; strawberry jam and thick tinned cream, whipped in Devonshire style.

In all directions now, there was nothing but bleak plain with stunted bushes and far horizons where sky and earth met without hindrance. The cry of the hawk and the cawing of the crows was all about us. We were more than a thousand miles out from the rich farming lands which spread down the full extent of Australia's eastern seaboard, and we were no doubt three hundred miles out from the nearest dairy farm. The cream, the butter, the cheese and strawberries, however, came to our table on the tailboard of the station-waggon just as easily as though we were in Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide, or in a village in England, ordering Devonshire tea. Every outpost in Australia is linked by skyways and roadways.

A man or woman hurt by accident or suddenly stricken by illness is often in hospital and receiving the best attention quicker than we can receive it in one of our large cities. So much depends, of course, on the time of the day when the accident occurs, or just where the Flying Doctor happens to be. Like a suburban doctor, he criss-crosses this area of his (which is about the size of France) on regular visits and wherever he is, he can be contacted at the times of his regular medical sessions which he holds three times a day.

Every homestead is a place of great resource and the people who live there most capable in times of illness. Many of them have had training in first-aid and also in nursing, and they have practice and knowledge in handling the instruments, medicines and drugs that are kept in the homestead medical cupboard.

Fine young women come out from our large cities, and often from England and Scotland and Eire, to nurse in the outback, like Mrs.

## *Walkabout*

Dixon; and they are constantly being replaced as they are so quickly snapped up and married by the station men or the outback policemen, or the young mining engineers.

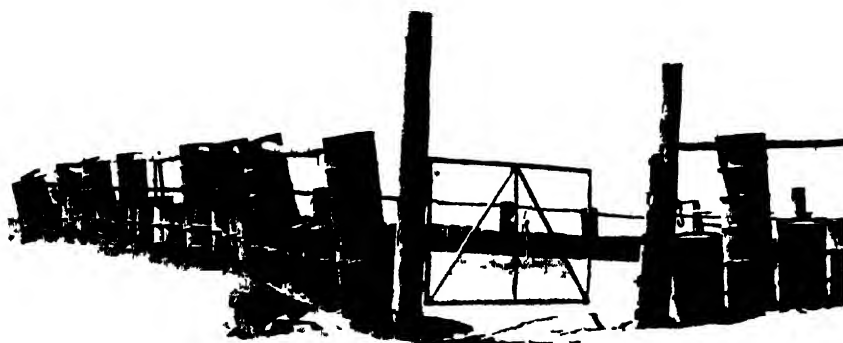
Doctor Charles Huxtable was laughing with Mrs. Dixon about some story she had to tell him. She was neat and prettily dressed, and still had a good complexion, and she laughed with that carefree infectious laughter that belongs to people who know what it is to really enjoy freedom. "I just love living out here," she said.

Harry always collected children like a Pied Piper, and as their shyness left them, they raced between Harry and ourselves with different stories of adventure out on the wide plains. They were disappointed that we couldn't stay over for a while and were most intrigued with all the "goings on" that were taking place to track down one of their little unseen schoolmates, little Danny O'Connor.

They had caught three little "horned devil" lizards especially for us and wanted to show us a mirage that was always permanent on the plains. But the doctor signalled that our time was up. It was half past four in the afternoon when we shook hands with the people of Murnpeowie and took to the air again. It was barely one hundred air miles from Murnpeowie to Muloorina but with a tough headwind against us we knew it would take us more than an hour. The earth was now cooler and we bumped less as we rose to two thousand feet and flattened out to become comfortably air-borne. We bashed into the headwind and rose and fell just a little above this land that had once been the inland sea and was now the hottest and driest land in Australia with an average rainfall of only five inches.

The Flying Doctor, with the green Tyrolean hat fixed rakishly on his head, was busy filling in his records. Elsa was also taking notes and Harry had his camera in position at the half-open door. I joined Harry and with belts strapped round us, which were securely fastened to the cabin, we watched the country below and filmed it at odd intervals when the plane was steady. The country below us looked like an endless mud-flat and we could in imagination see the tide come creeping back over the land, and see thousands of soldier crabs come marching and digging in like they do on our coastal mud-flats. It was indeed the old bed of the inland sea—hard baked now and cruel.

It was hard to understand how cattle could breed and exist on this



*A unique cattle-yard, made of petrol drums because of the local shortage of wood*

*Camel buggy bringing firewood into Oodnadatta*





## *Clinic in the Clouds*

land below our plane, and how people could prosper here. But here we were in some of the worst country in Australia and even out here talcum and uranium was being mined, and large herds of cattle went from here to market each season.

The red stones of the land below our plane have cried out the agony of the early explorers who first came to search this wilderness—the agony of Sturt and Gregory and Burke and Wills. This land of stone and sand stretches away for hundreds of miles on all sides. One could almost hear the groan and snarl of the burdened, beaten camels of those early explorers; the crack of greenhide whips worn to threads; the rumble of the bullock-drawn drays; the rough curses of Irish and English and Scotch, crazed with thirst and frustration, but refusing to give up. There were no canopied tops to their drays; no women; no laughter of children, just men struggling through space and blazing the sparse trees. Becoming lost and living and sometimes dying in the gunyahs of gaunt natives, black and naked.

Across this land which lay below our plane, the mirage always stalked the land. It was the phenomenon which upset the calculations of so many of the early explorers and settlers. There is one mirage which often occurs out here, and that is the "Mirage of Marree". It appears in the sky as a shimmering lake and upon the waters of this lake there appears a settlement with palms and a mosque and islands of green trees. Many travellers and people who live in this country have seen this strange mirage of Mohammedan mosque and bleached, galvanised-iron buildings, and know it to be the lonely, dusty, one-time camel town on the desert railway called Marree. The mosque was built there many years ago by the Afghan camel drivers, and with the galvanised-iron buildings and clumps of large green pepperina trees—the whole conglomeration of township is metamorphosed by the desert air and sunlight into a mirage of phantasy.

The unequal heating of the different atmospheric strata makes this a land of wonderful sky paintings. But above all this is a land of people—not in great numbers but in very small isolated communities—sometimes even by themselves. A lonely boundary rider or the keeper of a windmill all by himself, and the little station communities like the one we have left behind at Murnpeowie. We keep our toe-hold in this country by the lives and work of these settlers. To us their lives are very precious.

## Walkabout

We flew above the wide dry, watercourse of the Clayton River, which ends up in Lake Eyre. This was our first evidence of the Lake Eyre country. Then below the plane we saw the frail, winding Birdsville Track, along which the famed mailman travels in his great truck twice a month through foul and fine weather. He carries goods and mail to outposts, stretching through the deserts for more than four hundred miles to the little galvanised town of Birdsville. Birdsville lies just across the border between South Australia and Queensland.

I called to Elsa and she brought my camera and joined us at the open doorway. We handed her another large belt and she strapped herself as we had done. We filmed the Birdsville Track from the air.

The subject of the Birdsville Track was filmed some years ago by a young film man called John Heyer, whom I am proud to say did his very first film work with us as a "Boom boy". That is the man who keeps the microphone in its correct position above the heads of the artists. The factual film which Heyer made of the Birdsville Track was called *Back of Beyond* and has become acknowledged throughout the world as an outstanding documentary film.

Heyer and his team put in two seasons out here and they must have roughed it quite a bit to make that film. It has been said that *Back of Beyond* showed only the stark, barren side of Australia and that it was filmed in a time of drought. With such critics, Heyer couldn't have taken a trick either way because if he had filmed the mailman's journey from Marree to Birdsville in a good season, just following the rains, this land would have been a land of beautiful grasses and wild flowers—a land of milk and honey. If he had filmed it in this good time the people who live out there and many others would have no doubt said: "Oh, he only filmed this in a really good season, he should come out here and see it when the country is dry." If Heyer had not filmed it as he did the challenge that is the life of the Birdsville mailman and the challenge that is the life of every man and woman who lives and works out here would have been lost.

At all times let us tell the truth about our country and fling its challenge far and wide. We want men and women like our grandparents and great-grandparents to come here seeking both adventure and fortune. There is nothing finer and more inspiring than the truth of this land. Heyer only told the story of the mailman and of the stations



## *Clinic in the Clouds*

he served, but the dramatic cattle trail that we left behind us as we battled the headwinds to Muloorina is the greatest cattle track in the world today. It developed from the overlanding of a big mob of cattle by the greatest cattle duffer (rustler) of all times—Harry Readford.

In 1870 this man lifted one thousand head of cattle from Bowen Downs Station away up in Queensland and he droved them across a thousand miles of unknown country and through deserts where explorers had just previously perished, until he reached what are now known as the Strzelecki string of water-holes, named after a Pole who had helped explore large sections of the Great Divide, and had named our highest mountain Kosciusko after a Polish patriot.

Harry Readford was lucky. He explored this country with cattle in a good season. The Strzelecki led him on a track between Lakes Blanche and Callabonna into the country of Allan Walke, one of the very first men to establish a station so far north in the deserts of South Australia. With his brother, Walke had somehow clung to the desert lands about the Strzelecki and the Tinga Tingana water-hole, and had founded the cattle station Artracoona just ten years after the first sighting of the salt lakes by explorers. Day by day and night by night, Harry Readford had explored ahead of his cattle as they travelled, sleeping by himself under the stars, with dingoes sometimes tearing at his swag, and constantly fighting off the black man for grass and water for his cattle and for the right to light his camp-fire farther southward each night. For the waters of Tinga Tingana water-hole he bribed the blacks with a gift of some of his best bullocks and stumbling on through the bleak country between Lakes Blanche and Callabonna, he came to Blanche-water Cattle Station, where he sold his cattle for five thousand pounds.

The old westerners tell how Readford went on a spree up and down the rollicking tracks of the settlers and gold seekers, until he rode his way back towards Queensland, fighting all and sundry at the pubs, "taking on the girls" as they say and boasting of his exploits. He had founded a cattle track, a way through the deserts of Queensland and northern South Australia to the markets of Adelaide. The law caught up with him in western New South Wales, where he was kept in jail for a year, then transferred to Roma in the Queensland cattle country to stand trial. He was treated as a hero in a land of battling, pioneer cattle men, for whom he had opened a beef route south for

## Walkabout

their cattle and no jury could be found to convict him. He was pronounced "not guilty" and carried shoulder high from the Court.

Later we were to throw our swags in at the great Northern Territory cattle station of Brunette Downs, where the Duke of Edinburgh stayed and which has now been acquired by Robert J. Kleberg, the greatest cattle man in America today. This station was also founded by cattle duffer Harry Readford, when he was entrusted to overland three thousand head of cattle from the Barcoo River in Queensland to the newly discovered Barkly Tableland.

Readford and the Barnes brothers who followed, built Brunette into one of Australia's greatest cattle runs, but he never returned from the Territory. He was drowned while attempting to swim a flooded creek and it is said that when the floods receded an aborigine woman called Big Melia found his body and part of his "swag". She carefully wrapped him in what was left of his swag and buried him under a tree on this creek called Corella.

One of Australia's classic novels *Robbery under Arms* was founded on the exploits of yellow-bearded Harry Readford, from which a movie has been filmed a number of times.

If the reward in heaven is for scars and not medals, then the immortals, good or bad, who blazed these trails for cattle across the great Australian steppes are blessed indeed.

To the south of us we looked out across the same dead earth that led to Marree, the Central Australian railway line and the Overland Telegraph. Great dramas went behind the laying of the railway and the overland telegraph which linked us by cable from Darwin through exotic Java to London and the whole world. We have talked and sent our cables across this endless land ever since.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Napoleon of the Lake*

THIS land below us could have been the beginning or the end of the world. Geologists say that this area of the great lakes saw the end of the Australian embryo, and the final shaping of the present Australian continent. We were to meet the Man of the Lake, Elliott Price of Muloorina, perhaps the only man living who can claim to have been wrecked at sea in the inland of Australia. His story is bound up with the land itself. It is part of what we call Lake Eyre country.

Our plane banked and on the port side the brown earth rose quickly to meet us. As the plane tilted for another split second we saw the long line of silver meeting the sky, which was Lake Eyre. We turned, straightened out and the four homesteads that made Muloorina lay right in front of us. The setting sun threw the shadow of the Flying Doctor's plane to form a cross on the brown ground below. The shadow of the cross flew over small mulga trees and stunted bushes and over the clumps of salt bush. There were three mothers with young babies waiting here; two young expectant mothers; two blackfellows to have teeth drawn, and a case of threatening appendix out in a camp at the salt lake.

As usual on a still, fine day, we raced at the settlement point blank, to salute them and give them time to clear the runway. We swooped over the roofs close enough to rustle the bushy tops of the pepperina trees. Fowls ran in all directions and sheep dogs came out to bark and snap at each other and chase the fowls. Two young women waved their arms and a flock of goats lazing on the sides of a big earth dam tumbled and ran to a clump of small acacia trees. Hawks and crows swept in swarms from tree tops above a long sheet of water.

The Flying Doctor shouted to me, pointing down: "There's Elliott Price down there!" We rose and swept wide on to the plain to level

## *Walkabout*

out for the landing. I tightened the "surcingle" around myself at the open door of the plane and took the second camera—there was no time for a tripod, it was a case of shooting from the shoulder.

Filming our arrival at Muloorina from the plane's point of view was important. Harry shot downwards and I shot my pictures right ahead, through the blades of the propeller. In full rev the blades of the propeller of course are not visible. The buildings seemed to race right into our cameras. Clouds of red dust rose and swept away behind us in a great slip-stream, with the orb of setting sun turning the dust and outhouses to red. The airstrip below was marked out in long lines of camels' bones.

I swung the camera to try to catch this—overbalanced and hung near the door, slung in my harness. I heard Elsa shout above the rush of the wind and din of the propeller. Harry sat back on top of me as he turned to film our taxi-ing into the Muloorina backyard. All the inhabitants followed a thickset lumbering man across the yard to meet us. As a boring-contractor and station-owner, Elliott Price looked more like Napoleon.

The late afternoon sun was still hot as we stepped from the plane and shook hands with Elliott Price and Mrs. Price, a large motherly woman. Elliott's son, Keith, and three married daughters, Hazel, Mary and Val were there also and two attractive girls who seemed to have a dash of Afghan. The main homestead was large—it had everything—and there were two other homesteads just the same, each of them built for a married son or daughter.

"I promised each of my kids a fine home when they married—a home as good as any in Sydney," Elliott Price said as he took my arm and walked me to the homestead door. Mrs. Price did the same with Elsa. We would only be there for two nights and a day and he had a lot to tell us and to show us.

I started off by asking how big his property was, and made the mistake of calling him "Mr. Price". At once he shot me a reproving look.

"I'll answer that, Charles, if you call me Elliott—we don't bother about surnames out here."

"I'll be glad to call you Elliott," I replied.

"Well, I've just on one thousand five hundred square miles here.

## *Napoleon of the Lake*

The place was taken up sixty years ago by a man called Bosworth, who ran ninety thousand sheep and there were twenty 'stands' for shearers who shored the sheep with hand blades. They nearly grazed the country out." He burst out laughing and gave me a tremendous clap on the shoulder. "That's when you should have brought your cameras, Charles! Twenty men shearing ninety thousand sheep with hand shears, and the Bosworths lived in two underground rooms and dug-outs, and their shearers and shepherds were all abos—black as the Ace of Spades."

Elliott Price moved like a machine-gun and talked like one. To meet him was an experience, an adventure in itself. With his chin slightly stuck out as if to tempt fate to try and hit it back, he bulldozed his way through life, his eyes fixed ahead on what he wanted. Yes, he talked fast and moved fast, and you either walked like blazes to keep up with him or stood back and got out of his way.

We turned at the door to let Elsa and Mrs. Price and the girls pass into the house. I noticed our pilot hitching our small plane to a powerful hitching post. I had seen this done before, right up in the far Northern Territory. "It's to keep the wind from blowing her away," Elliott said. "When the dust storms come sweeping in from the Simpson Desert on the other side of the lake, it can blow whole homesteads away, and even an ordinary wind in the night could damage the plane."

He swept his hand across the whole backyard. "Do you see all that gear over there? Those earth-moving machines and tractors and graders? They all belong to Muloorina and they're kept in repair here in our big workshop. We don't go outside for anything if we can help it, and we control our own store in Marree. Did you see the camel bones out on our landing-ground?" he asked.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I replied: "Yes, where did you get them?"

"Well, this is how it happened," he said. "After the first great war the South Australian Government bought Muloorina from the Bosworth's for thirty-six thousand pounds and the Government used it as a camel-breeding station. They used the camels to draw the waggon and carry all the material to sink a bore and build a big earth tank every twenty miles, over the 320 miles Birdsville Track. That's one of the biggest

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jobs of boring ever done in the world," he added. "All that work was done from here. Then after it finished, a caretaker lived here until it was taken over by my father. The arrangement made with us was that we should shoot all the 1,500 camels. Seemed tough on the camels but that was the arrangement and I've used their bones to lay out my airstrip, a sort of monument to them."

Just then, Mrs. Price called: "Elliott, don't talk so much. You'd better bring Mr. Chauvel in, he might like a cold shower."

"Muloorina" in aborigine means "place of plenty". What it could have had in the early days before the father of Elliott Price took it over would have been very little, if matched by all the harsh signs of the country around, and with the knowledge of how those men and women suffered. From what we know, this one man, Elliott Price, who had little schooling because he had to work to help support his six brothers and sisters, has been responsible with his wife, for the plenty of everything which is to be found at Muloorina today.

It was a fabulous story. One I was to put together during the hectic time we spent at the homestead. One thing in particular we wanted to know—how the oldest known watercourse in the world, the exhausted remains of the Frome River, had been made to flow again. To hear the true story of this, and to see it, was one of our main reasons for flying to Muloorina.

I was under the shower when Elliott shouted to me from outside:

"Charles, how's the water? Taste it." I tasted it and spluttered back: "The water's good, Elliott."

"I'm glad you like it," he called. "Because it's coming from the oldest river in the world. It was dry until I put water into it. I put a bore down for eighteen hundred feet and two million gallons of water flows from that bore every day into the old Frome River. Yes! she's got water for twenty miles now. But you go ahead, Charles, and enjoy your shower."

I did. I got under it and stayed under. It was cold—icy cold—and sweet to drink. I put my head back and let it flow down my throat. I needed it after three hours over No Man's Land. I could hear the shower going in Elsa's bathroom. "How are you liking it?" I called to her. "Wonderful, dear," she called back. "It even beats the Waldorf Astoria!"

## *Napoleon of the Lake*

I agreed. One's senses and appreciations are edged up out in a country like this. Under the glorious cascade of cold, sweet water from the River Frome, I firmly believed I had never had a shower like this before.

Harry was waiting with towel and soap outside, so I called: "Come in Harry, the water's fine." As he opened the door, Elliott popped his head in and called to me: "I've got a part of the Frome dammed for a swimming-pool, too, and I've got black and white swans and duck, and sometimes geese swimming on it, too. I'll show it all to you tomorrow."

On my way back to our room, bathrobed and with towel and soap, I was deviated to meet the four girls in the kitchen. They lived forty miles away in Marree, and came here to help Mrs. Price with her work and in the house. Elsa came and joined us. Looking round, she asked: "How many acres?"

"Muloorina covers one thousand five hundred square miles—we don't count in acres."

Elsa laughed, "No, Elliott," she said. "I mean the kitchen."

That kitchen had everything—stainless-steel sinks, expensive electric refrigerators, automatic garbage disposals under every sink and hot and cold water. A wonderful meal was being prepared for us. There were many different dishes.

The doctor had a medical to take, so we went to our room and rested before dressing for dinner. Dressing for dinner of course was a clean print for Elsa, which she had run the iron over and a change into a clean shirt for me. We only had ourselves and our swags.

We lay on our great inner-sprung bed under an electric fan in this warm autumn of the year. Muloorina had shut out the whole wide eroded world of lonely desert and heat and mirage. All about us was the throb of electric machinery and in the distance, the voice of our doctor taking his last medical for the day; giving his instructions to patients, back through all the vast lands of the lakes and the rugged Flinders Range—out and across the steppes to Queensland.

Then a radio somewhere hammered out the national news of the day. Surely there was no such thing as isolation. From the large window of our room we looked through a dark tracery of green and red as the thick branches of a large pepperina tree caught the last red glow of the sun, already well below the rim of the horizon.

People seemed to come from everywhere to sit round the dinner-

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table. There was Elliott's married daughter and her husband in from a "home on wheels" somewhere out in the desert; an unmarried son and an unmarried daughter. There were the smiling girls from Marree and a man 'from the fencers' camp out on Lake Eyre; and of course ourselves and our doctor and pilot.

Mrs. Price smiled over to us. "What will you have, Mrs. Chauvel?" Elliott's knife paused temptingly in mid-air, above a number of dishes. Hot roast pork, cold salads, boiled silverside and mammoth carrots, boiled potatoes in their jackets, boiled onions in white sauce and cold roast beef. This was Muloorina, the place of plenty.

When we had made our choice and received our helping, Elliott said: "Now don't be afraid to come back for more—don't sit back in your breechings. There's plenty where this comes from. We grow everything here—don't have to go outside Muloorina for anything."

We looked at the pictures on the walls of the big dining-room. Like most Australian country homes, there are large photographs, often coloured, of members of the family in uniform, who had fought at Gallipoli, or in France in the first great war, and those with clusters of emu feathers in their slouch hats, who took their own horses to Egypt and fought with the Anzac Mounted Division in the tough desert campaigns of Sinai and Palestine.

There were three fine photographs of seascapes, with a wild surf breaking against towering walls and cliffs of sand. We admired them and found that these were photographs taken of Lake Eyre when it was filled with water, just three years previously, and for the first time in one hundred years. "And there's not a drop of water in the lake now?" we asked. "Not enough to wet the bottom of a humming bird," Elliott said. "It all evaporated in just over eighteen months, and there was eleven feet of water across that 150 mile long lake. Now it's just salt again."

Our conversation turned to the Birdsville Track and the man who first pioneered it—Harry Readford. "There's been a lot said about that man, but nothing at all about Ralph Milner, and a greater cattle man never lived. Some years before Readford came down with his cattle, Ralph Milner started off with a mob of sheep along Cooper's Creek but drought forced him to pull up at a spot near the Creek. There he made a station and called it Killamperpunna.



## *Napoleon of the Lake*

"Yes, and he had his wife with him," Mrs. Price said quietly. "And she never came out of that country alive. She died where he had stopped and built his first homestead."

We were learning things that were well beyond our history books now. I suggested that this fellow, Milner, must have been right on the heels of the explorers, Babbage and Warburton and Gregory.

"Sometimes I think it's hard to say who pushed out into some of these places first," said Elliott. "Because a lot of those early settlers wanted to find good land and squat on it ahead of all comers. But believe me, Milner's wife was the first woman ever to come out to these parts."

"You don't know any more about her, do you?" asked Elsa.

"No I don't," Elliott replied. "But I feel mighty sorry for her."

As usual we planned the next day's work at the dinner-table. It would be a full one.

Elliott spoke across to the doctor: "I want to show the Chauvels what I've done with the Frome River and take them for a run along some of the highways I've built—and show them that when five inches of rain fall in this country that I don't let one drop of it get away."

"Charles wants to charter the plane for an hour," the doctor said. "He wants to film what he can of the surface of the lake and the country along the shores on this side."

"Yes," I replied. "Even we Australians don't know enough about Lake Eyre. I've tried to get information from our geography and history books without much success, apart from the fact that it's four times the size of the Dead Sea, and the last visible remains of our old Cretaceous Sea. I want to record all I can about it."

Piece by piece we carved up the next day, making plans. Then the girls played the piano and sang to us, old songs and new, and sometimes we all joined in.

The doctor held his consultations in a room on the southern side of the house and as his patients left him they came and joined in the singing. When he had finished, he too came and added his voice to "I'll be comin' round the Mountain when I Come" and "In the Sweet By and By". Quite late in the evening we had supper. Rainbow cake and cream; wonderful hot scones and butter and cups of tea and coffee. Elsa, concerned about avoirdupois, called for mercy and hoped that

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somehow she'd have plenty of exercise out on the lake the following day.

Elliott laughed heartily. "Just don't worry about it, Elsa," he said. "Don't worry about it till you've left Muloorina."

"But that's what they all say everywhere we go in this country!" Elsa replied.

We were all bustling about at six the next morning. We ate an early breakfast and the doctor walked out to the plane with Elsa and Harry and me. "Elliott's an amazing man, Charles, isn't he?" the doctor said.

I agreed readily and he told me more about him. "His old man was a boring-contractor. Perhaps the first in Australia, and Elliott did very well as a boring-contractor himself, and with his brother bought this land when nobody wanted it. A few years ago the country broke him, but he hung on and won through. It's not so long ago that I operated out here in a room lined with hessian and bags. He's built this empire out here in a handful of years. It shows what can be done. Here he is now—and I must go and set up for my medical. Good flying!"

Good flying it was as our pilot approached the great lake, with Harry handling the camera right at the open door of the plane. Flat sandhill country rolled away before us, soft, treacherous-looking ripples of sand—through which the track from Muloorina twined away out to the lake's edge.

"I bet you never thought you'd find anybody trying to fence in Lake Eyre," Elliott shouted in my ear.

"No," I shouted back. "I never even thought I'd find anyone living out here."

"Shows how much you fellows know about Australia!"

"It's a big country, Elliott—can't know it all."

He shouted in my ear again: "You know the Government's dingo fence was built all the way from Ceduna on the Great Australian Bight and right up through Queensland? They thought the water in Lake Eyre would keep the dingoes back in these parts. But there was no water in the lake. What the early explorers and others always thought was water, was just mirage, that's all. So they left this one opening across the whole continent, and the dingoes have come

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across that lake in droves." He paused for breath, then went on, "For twenty years that lake has bled my sheep herds—taken thousands of 'em from me. Just one dingo can kill twenty sheep in one night." He pointed out to the lake. "I'm running the fence for just on forty miles across this open arm in the lake—joining it up to the other ends of the Government fence."

Our plane banked to allow our cameras to film the strange coastline before turning to fly over the floor of the lake. Elliott was still shouting in my ear: "It's goin' to be a three-strand barbed-wire fence, three feet high, and it will be electrified. All this sandhill country will come good for the sheep. It means I can run another seven thousand out here."

We banked again, and according to plan, came down low to just a hundred feet above the floor of the lake. This enabled us to use our big lenses and film the surface, which had a strange pattern, at times pocked with holes or rounded muddy depressions in the white salt. There were mounds of drifted debris, but mostly salt and nothing more. But we learned some odd things.

In those mounds of driftwood well out in the lake, there are strange colonies of earless lizards. These lizards live on large harvesting ants, who in turn feed on grass seeds blown to them by prevailing winds. Each year the bushes and herbs of the surrounding country have their time of seeding and there is nothing on the floor of this smooth, flat lake of dry salt to arrest the movements of the seed except the brushwood mounds. Apart from this strange, self-sufficient colony of lizards and ants, and the dingoes that use the lake as a bridge to the sheep country, there is no other life on Lake Eyre.

We turned and flew out on to harder country east of the lake. A mixture of sand and gibbers where one patch of country fought with the other for supremacy. Under the large gibbers(stones) live the water-holding frogs, once so prized by the aborigine, with its head and leg tucked under it, sleeping right through the dry months, its body bloated with the water it drank before digging itself underground. The aborigines would dig up these frogs and squeeze the water from them into wooden coolamons or into the palms of their hands. This is the story of another living desert.

We banked and headed back to Muloorina, for smoke-oh-tea and

## *Walkabout*

Johnnie cakes and scones. Then Elliott's beautiful Ford Zephyr pulled in to take us out along his highways and out to his Opera House. This was still something of a mystery to us.

We met a wide and well-graded track just out from the airstrip and immediately picked up speed. "I've sunk nearly twenty thousand pounds into road-building equipment," he said, "and I've built just on one hundred miles of highways across my cattle run. You see the country's quite flat and I can muster my sheep and cattle with jeeps instead of horses. I want to be able to get all over my land quickly—know just how my cattle and sheep are all the time. I'll be buying some helicopters soon—then I'll run my whole station from the air."

I felt Elsa involuntarily putting the brakes on, and I looked down at the speedometer. We were just on eighty miles an hour and red dust was rising thirty feet into the sky to hide the landscape behind.

"I can hold her at a hundred miles an hour without any trouble," Elliott shouted.

"Yes, I know you can—your roads are marvellous, Elliott, but do you mind if you drop down a bit?"

"Right, Charles, I'll drop down." So we purred along at sixty until we came to two aluminium houses on wheels, not far from some large earthworks. Elliott spoke across to Elsa: "This is my daughter's home. You remember you met her and her husband last night. Her husband's the greatest dam-maker in the country."

We met his daughter again, and she showed us over her temporary home. Both aluminium rooms were up high off the ground on tremendous tyred wheels. "Her husband just hooks the tractor on when they want to move," Elliott said. "Then they can go anywhere. Later on we'll be building another homestead for them in at Muloorina, but just for a while they've got dams to build. Water is the whole secret of this country."

Elliott's daughter invited us to look at her large aluminium caravans. They were really something. One was the bedroom with a partitioned end for the cots of her two children—the other was her kitchen and living room. The bedroom was most attractive with its comfortable inner-sprung double bed. There was a light-blue shaded reading lamp clamped to the back of the bed and an attractive bookcase beside the wall. There was quite good carpeting on the floor and electric

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fans in both caravans and wide windows that opened to the desert on both sides.

Elliott's daughter looked fit and happy and the children even better, as they played in the sand with their toys on the shady side of the caravans.

"I give my oldest kiddie correspondence lessons every day," she said, "and in about two years' time she'll be joining the School of the Air."

Elliott took me over to his Opera House. I looked down into a new, huge, earth dam, twenty-eight feet in depth. He told me that when it is full it will hold five and a half million gallons of water. Out across the plains, long drains were already leading to it. "We're running twenty-four miles of drains into it. One man and one tractor has built that in two months. That's my Opera House. A bit different to yours in Sydney, which is going to cost millions of pounds to help keep the people in the city when they aren't needed there. We do these things by ourselves out here if we can afford to. Not enough votes out here to get the Government to spend money to tie up the waters. Some day they'll dam the lakes at Menindie and perhaps the big billabongs along the Strzelecki. This land will grow anything. I run cattle and eighteen thousand sheep safely. Later on I'll be running twice that number, with more fencing and more water."

On the way back to the homestead we saw some sheep—the first animals we had seen out here. We had not even seen a kangaroo. Elliott stopped the car: "Have a look at those sheep, Charles. They're a special breed of Merino, something for the State of South Australia to be proud of. We've learned to breed our own desert type of Merino. It's a big-framed, powerful sheep, with strong legs and not too heavy a coat of wool. Those sheep can go without water for days, and walk long distances to find their food and water."

"Do they grow good wool?" I asked. "Some of the very best," he replied. "The original Merino we bred from came from Saxony."

We travelled over a hundred miles of Muloorina country, and when closer in to the homestead he showed us the artesian bore and the channel leading to the Frome, which supplies that old river with water. The water was gushing up with tremendous force. Elliott has built a

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Pelton wheel at this bore to drive a generator and carried the electric power to the homesteads on poles for seven miles.

This man, without much schooling, is no fool engineer. In fact, he's no fool anything: he is a typical product of this part of the world. They learn or die out here and the country benefits by the type of man it breeds.

When we arrived back at the homestead, the doctor was looking pleased. There were no emergencies to be coped with, and he had news for us.

"We've found Danny O'Connor for you, Charles!" he said. "When you leave Wertaloona on your way out of this country you can call on Barney Hassan, the manager at Frome Downs. He'll direct you to the O'Connor camp—it's out in the sandhills near Lake Frome."

"That's great news. The whole country seems to have been trying to nail him down for us! We're in luck, Elsa."

But things don't always turn out the way we want them—and this was to be one of those things.







### *The Impossible Takes Time*

AFTER lunch we all piled into Elliott's eight-wheel-drive blitz waggon, specially built for sandhill country, and set off for Lake Eyre. As we swung through the hills he shouted above the roar of the engine that this was cool weather for these parts. "You should be here when the sun fries an egg for you and the big dust storms black everything out!"

It seemed hot enough to us, although the sun was filtered through fleecy white clouds. In spite of this, when we suddenly hit the great white lake, the glare from the vast expanse of salt immediately hurt our eyes. We all put on dark goggles, and at forty miles an hour we attacked the salt floor of the lake.

"You never know what she's going to do," shouted Elliott, "so we don't give her time to make up her mind—we just keep travelling." I realised that he meant the lake, not the blitz waggon. Salt flew from both sides of the vehicle as our wheels broke through four or five inches of coarse brine. It was strange to see brown mud showing under the salt. We left a great track behind us and as we moved deeper into the lake the heat-whitened sky came down all about us to meet the whiter ground of the lake. Soon all horizons were lost and we travelled in a complete white void. It was uncanny. We could have been on another planet—it seemed impossible that people could be working out here.

"Look at the dingo tracks," Elliott nodded over to the right. "Dozens of 'em. In a few weeks from now my fence will blast them—knock them cockeyed."

We met up with the track made by the fencing team, and swung along in its deep grooves. We were moving in a world of torpid sky and salt, and even with a clouded sky our light meters had gone beyond their range of exposure. All we could do with our cameras was to stop right down and hope for the best.

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Harry shouted "We'll be over-exposed. But if there was no cloud we wouldn't be able to photograph at all." We each tried to pierce the distance with powerful binoculars, but as far as we could see there was still only salt. Sometimes a black spot or a tall, black outline would loom on the horizon and when we focused our binoculars it would appear in its natural form as a round clump of brushwood imprisoned in the salt or the broken branch of a tree standing out of the salt floor—flotsam and jetsam from the mulga and wilga country.

Then a headland appeared; we had crossed an arm of the lake, and out of the gloom we saw a line of men, marching like giants with great weapons slung on their shoulders towards a line of towering posts. The fence posts seemed to be twelve feet high, but as we neared them they slowly reduced to their correct height of three feet. The men waited in a group beside their open jeep.

Elliott brought his blitz waggon to a halt right beside them, and at that moment the reflected heat from the great salt pan felt suffocating. It was just as though an oven door had been opened right in front of us. There were about eight powerful young men either sitting on, or standing beside the jeep—nude except for the briefest of shorts and shining with sweat.

They were all bronzed with the sun, some were burned almost black and they all wore goggles and broad-brimmed hats with fly-veils. One flaxen-haired fellow wore his fly-veil slung from his hat on a suspended framework to keep the veil well out from his face. Fly-veils are made of light, knotted string, and are not unlike the smaller string-meshed shopping bags women use.

These fellows were all from our cities, most of them coming from Melbourne and Adelaide. They spend the winter seasons up here fencing at high rates of pay, and their weekends at Muloorina or in at Marree dancing with the dark-eyed girls.

At the back of one of the sandhills, about half a mile from the lake they lived in two aluminium huts on wheels. It was quite an undertaking, to work all day building a fence upon this expanse of glaring white with the temperature well over one hundred degrees and no shade anywhere—not a tree within twenty miles.

Elliott introduced them and we fired questions at them: the lake—the heat—the flies—their isolation and their long nights under the

## *The Impossible Takes Time*

stars. We found that they only came up here for the four months of winter; that they saved their good pay and liked adventure. Two or three of them said they had come out to learn more about Australia. "We can't learn anything about this part of the world in our history books," one fellow said. "You've got to come out and see for yourself."

The doctor attended to the boss of the party, a tall, dark young man, who was suffering with stomach pains, and found that he had a chronic appendix. He gave him advice about treating himself and as the desert railway was within sixty miles suggested that he should take a train down from Marree to Port Augusta or Adelaide and have his appendix removed. The doctor, of course, would only perform such an operation out here in cases of emergency. The man with the appendix agreed to return to Muloorina with us and as it was time for the doctor to hold his medical we set up a makeshift aerial on the floor of the salt lake. I dug a shovel deep in the mud and the pilot attached his wire and the radio set was placed on the wide mudguards of the blitz waggon. The doctor adjusted his headphones and made contact with his base in Broken Hill. Elsa stood by to take his notes.

Soon the air was spluttering with the various call-signs: 8 EM; 8 NAG; 9 IA; 8 QS; 9 NT; 9 IG. The doctor switched over and called: "Come in 9 IG. I'll take Popio Station first. Hello, Popio—I'm speaking from Lake Eyre. Can you hear me, Popio?"

Elliott took me over to a tall post dug deeply into the floor of the lake. On this, levels were plainly marked in feet, right up to twelve feet. "After heavy rains on the highlands and mountains, hundreds and even a thousand miles and more from here, water pours into the lake," he told me. "Sometimes it only runs into one corner, but if it reaches here, then I must keep the levels. Believe me, it's world news if this lake fills."

He pointed up to the eleven-foot mark. "That's where it came to just over two years ago, and now she's as dry as a bone. Out here evaporation takes ten feet of water a year." He swung his hand behind us to the headland of sand. "That's where we went surfing," he said. Then he laughed as he remembered his exploit in the boat.

"Two fellows volunteered with me to sail a boat across it. But we got the wind up when we were some miles out and lost all our bearings; so we came in and decided to follow the shore right round.

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Then we were caught in a storm and wrecked. Bet that's the first time any man has ever gone to sea in the centre of Australia, and if history repeats itself it might be another hundred years before a boat sails on it again."

"I suppose Cooper's Creek and the Warburton bring most of the water to the lake?"

He turned on me almost angrily. "Why does everyone think the Cooper is responsible for Lake Eyre? No, Lake Eyre just about drains half of Australia. It gets most of its water from the big ranges in Central Australia—the McDonalds, the Musgraves and the Everard. The rains from Queensland divide themselves between the Warburton and the Cooper, and the Flinders Range also empties a lot of water down the Frome and Clayton rivers."

I couldn't help thinking that if a civilisation had existed here when the great lake filled with roaring seas in ancient times and all the low-lying land was inundated, a claim could have been laid that this was the area of the flood of biblical times.

"And all flesh died upon the earth, both of fowl and of cattle, and of beast and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth and every man."

Wherever they dig for opals or for water in this land the remains of these things which crept upon the earth millions of years ago are found.

Nothing has ever been unearthed in the clay to show that any form of civilisation ever existed in this great region of Australia, no human bones or ornaments or tile fragments.

Whatever happened geologically to change the very being and nature of this land, could not have come to it as a divine judgement against an advanced civilisation, like the one of the Kings of Ur grown terrible by greed and perversity, because no such civilisation ever existed on Australia's land masses. We have nothing in this land to show as the bible states: "That there were tyrants upon this earth and that the earth was corrupt before God's eyes and full of wickedness, and therefore had to be destroyed."

The lake, since it filled five years ago, the salt crust hardened by the swift process of evaporation, has preserved faithfully all the imprints made upon it. I could pick out the paw-marks of dingoes; the tracks of lizards; the bleached skeletons of marsupial mice and of great eagles

## *The Impossible Takes Time*

who preyed upon one another, when the last waters were leaving the lake.

The filling of the lake had brought a vitality to the whole area; for a while animals and birds had come to it as they had never come before. Elliott told me of the islands away out in the centre where thousands of pelicans had made their nests and brought out their flocks of young, to learn to swim and fish upon the lake where because of the waters nothing could prey upon them.

All about the great lake there was nothing but stillness now. Elliott broke the silence. "When those boys have finished building that fence, I'll have another five hundred square miles of sheep country."

The lustreless sun was sinking slowly behind strange veils of cloud as our blitz waggon churned out and away from the lake. A vaporous mist gathered on what would be the western horizon. We wiped the salty sweat from our faces and arms and watched this strange phenomena of sunset. We could have been here millions of years ago and seen and felt the sun go down in quite the same way—the antedeluvian sun of yesterday.

We said so long to the young men building the Elliott fence; as they stood about their equipment they looked like a group of surf life-savers. Elliott—the man of the lake—the man who lived very much in the present—the man who was building a small Empire here, hurried us back into the blitz waggon and shouted: "Hold on! I'm going to give the blitz its head."

We swung into the sandhills, swaying like a ship from side to side. Lifting and rising and plunging down the sides of the dunes we took the track which led back to Muloorina.

Sunrise and our last morning at Muloorina. I always love a bush sunrise and never miss a chance to selfishly steal out alone to watch its changing glory. I could hear Charles singing under the shower, his favourite saddle song "Wrap me up in my stockwhip and blanket", and Elliott calling to him to hurry up. I think Elliott must have heard me leaving the house and was afraid that I might cheat him of the pleasure of showing us personally his man-made river.

The air was so clear on this morning that all sounds came to me sharply. The screech of the snow-white correllas was deafening; the

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clang of the windmill sharp and vibrant. I could hear the women calling from one homestead to another across the flat compound; and the voices of the girls in the kitchen came to me on crystal sharp cascades of laughter, mingled with the kindly voice of Mrs. Price.

I felt a pang of regret that I would soon be saying good-bye to that fine woman. I suddenly remembered that through the years "good-bye" seemed to be the word most frequently used by Charles and me. Mrs. Price had lived out here through drought and dreadful heat in a bough shed, and when things had looked hopeless had asked her husband to hang on.

I had reached the top of the dam and turned to look back. A jeep came rushing down the hill with Elliott, Charles and Harry.

I ran down from the top of the earth bank and joined them, and Elliott drove us to a point where we could look through the bloodwood and lignum trees to the long reach of the Frome River, now a beautiful watercourse. We disturbed some wild duck and they skimmed the surface of the water and frightened other birds. Then we quietly turned a heavily timbered corner and saw some black swans swimming on a beautifully wooded lake. Two long-legged native companions hurried away from the water's edge and danced excitedly behind the lignum trees, and then took to flight.

"This is my swimming pool," Elliott said. "Have you seen a more beautiful one?" Before we could answer he was telling us how he had stocked the pool with trout. "I flew them up here myself in my Auster plane and they're doing very well."

I had another good look at this man; nuggety and thickset, with a stance like Napoleon. His great, tawny, rough-skinned hands held the wheel of the jeep as though in a vice. He has had little schooling but we do know that he can add up figures like a robot. This is the man who came with his wife to a grazed-out, worn-out, unwanted camel-camp on the side of Lake Eyre. He came to the driest, hottest place in Australia and fifteen years ago he was broke.

My thoughts were shattered by the noisy, headlong flight of beautiful green parakeets, as they skimmed low over the lake and just missed our heads by inches.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it rained," said Elliott, almost to himself. "Have you noticed how clear all the sounds are this morning? We're

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due for it and we often get our best rains at this time. All the birds are flying low and those long streaks of cloud mean a change of weather. I'll have five million gallons of water in that earth tank if it does." Water! water! that is the thought always uppermost in their minds.

After breakfast the Flying Doctor chatted to the women with their babies and talked to a couple of young wives expecting their first; weighed the babies, and looked down their throats once again.

Mrs. Price knew that we would be camping out again after that night at Wertaloona, so she filled our tucker box with titbits: home-made jam and cookies, and a wonderful soda loaf. "Keep it in a damp cloth, and it will be at its best two days from now," she said.

Our pilot unhitched the plane from the post. We taxied easily down the rows of stark, white camel bones and took to the air. The plane banked and circled in what must have looked from down below, a really pretty salute to Muloorina.

The Frome watercourse shone like a line of silver below us. Then we lifted into the sky and turned to the east, and soon Muloorina was just like all the other homesteads that turn to lonely specks in the immensity of their surroundings. Soon below us, we saw Elliott's great earth dam, like a spider's web with its fine fretwork of drains stretching away across the flat brown earth in every direction, from the centre of the dam—waiting for the rains.

A glint of sun on metal was the caravan we had visited. The sun was cruelly hot, so we pulled down the curtains on my side of the plane and I gave myself over to riding the bumps. Harry disported himself once again in the stretcher and Charles, as usual, studied his maps. Soon the bumps got worse and we fastened our belts. But nothing seemed to deter the doctor. As usual, with his jaunty Tyrolean hat on the side of his head, he made out his reports.

We flew above and along the great, dry, scarred, upper reaches of the Frome, and an hour later bumped our way through a deep gap in the Flinders Range between Mt. Lyndhurst and Mt. Umberatana, well on our way.

After lunch that day at Wertaloona we said good-bye to the Flying Doctor and began our filming of the School of the Air scenes, with little Jane Wilson and her governess. We worked right up until the end of the day, finishing up by filming another beautiful sunset.

## *Walkabout*

Another night in comfort; hot showers and home-cooked meals, and then after finishing our scenes of Wertaloona we lunched and set out in our vehicles on the dusty roads again, in search of our last pupil of the School of the Air—little Danny O'Connor.

We travelled about seventy uneventful miles that day and camped not far from Frome Downs homestead. The sky was clouding heavily. This was spongy loose-sand country, and we knew that if it rained heavily we could be bogged down out here for a week.

Spots of rain fell that night. Perhaps this was a warning. We pulled in to Frome Downs early the next morning and Charles found Barney Hassan, the manager. He was a very nice, kindly little man; wiry and brown, with keen eyes. Every spare inch of him spelt "bushman" and he insisted that we come into the homestead and have a cup of tea, while he gave Charles directions out to the Danny O'Connor boring plant.

"It won't rain today," he said. "But it could be working up for a good fall. I'd keep an eye on it, you'd never get out of O'Connor's country if half an inch or more fell." Then he gave us directions how to get back on to the main road once we had left the O'Connor camp.

Barney Hassan sent an aborigine out with the station's truck to accompany us as far as the turn-off into O'Connor's camp, and we had only just made it when we saw what looked like a brand-new limousine racing over the sandhills towards us. It was plunging into the sand rifts, spraying sand from its sides like a ship at sea. Then quite suddenly it stopped, and a man and a very tiny and well-dressed little boy got out. We found our vehicles sinking deeply into the sand as we moved towards them, and as we approached closer the man put up his two hands in warning. We knew then that he was bogged.

We walked over and he introduced himself as O'Connor and his little son, Danny. This of course was the little boy who was so shy when taking his lessons with the other pupils in the School of the Air. He just stood and grinned shyly but happily. His mother had dressed him up in his Sunday best.

We set to with our Land Rover and pulled O'Connor's beautiful car out of the loose sand. Then we attempted to follow in with our Holden car, but bogged hopelessly and the afternoon was racing away from us. O'Connor told us that his camp was five miles in from the



## *The Impossible Takes Time*

track and set amongst loose sandhills where he was sinking a bore for Frôme Downs station.

Then a pow-wow took place, and with the weather so threatening, Charles felt it would be unwise for us to venture in with both our vehicles so late in the evening. The wisest course would be to make camp that night on a hard, flat claypan, right beside the road, where we could make a quick getaway if it should start to rain. If the weather was still fine the next morning we could take our four-wheel drive Land Rover and travel in through the sand to the O'Connor camp. We would film there until lunch-time and then come back to the main track, pick up our Holden and continue our journey out.

Everyone agreed that this was a wise plan, and as the evening closed in darkly upon us, with the sun completely hidden behind the heavy, slate-coloured banks of cloud, we boiled the billy and had our evening meal in a world that was deathly silent. There was no sound or sight of animal, bird or insect.

It was an uncanny silence. Not even a breeze stirred that evening. We each agreed that it was the quietest night we had ever spent in the Australian bush. Just before dawn it started to rain softly. We heard it pattering on our tarpaulin.

Charles literally shot out of bed and went out on to the claypan to study the sky. He had experienced being caught napping in this type of country many times in his life and knew what it could mean. The rain eased but there was vivid lightning in the sky to the west and thunder rolled ominously.

Charles and Harry started to build up the fire and Charles called to me to get dressed. He said: "We'll strike camp and pack everything while the billy's boiling and after we've had a cup of tea and some buttered toast, we'll take to the road. I think that storm is coming very slowly this way and should be more than half an hour away. Whatever we do we must keep ahead of it, even if only by ten minutes."

I'm sure we have never dressed and packed ourselves and our camp as quickly as we did that morning. All equipment was stowed away in the vehicles within fifteen minutes, and as we stood in our oilskins beside the spluttering fire, we enjoyed a good cup of tea. We could see the rain falling behind a range of hills about ten miles to the west.

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Fortunately there were fair-weather skies to the south-east in the direction in which we were to travel—otherwise we would not have waited even for the tea.

Poor shy little Danny O'Connor of the sandhill country! Somehow fate had stood in the way of his appearing in our film of the *School of the Air*. All the children of this vast schoolroom had been on their toes to find Danny O'Connor for us and now they would all be waiting in vain for his appearance as a film player. Danny would have to say that he was all dressed for the part and that he had, as the song goes, "brought his harp to the party and nobody had asked him to play". We all felt a little sad and depressed, realising his disappointment.

We of course had a tight schedule of dates to keep in order to bring the subjects planned to the television screen, and we were due in Port Augusta, three hundred miles away, in two days' time.

We left a note for Danny—pinned to a mulga tree, saying how sorry we were and asking him to say good-bye for us to all his cobbles in the world's biggest school room.

But now we had to race away from this land of mirage, just one step ahead of the rain which seemed to pursue us like a witch riding a dark broom high in the sky, through the longest and flattest plains I have ever seen—wide open to the sky and the wind and the weather. Late on the fourth day of April we arrived in the sea-port and meeting-place of the long desert railways. Port Augusta—the Port of Camels.

### *Port of Camels*

FROM out of the haze that hung about the bare stone walls of the Flinders Range we hurried towards Port Augusta—the port which in its beginning had been just a flagstaff standing in a waste of sand. But this was the place which had cradled in its first forlorn streets of slabbed and mud-packed huts, the very beginning of the great desert pastoral holdings; the place that had outfitted some of our most famous explorers, and given birth to the Overland Telegraph and the great railways that linked the East of Australia with the West, and tapped the very heart of the continent.

This was the port to which the camels came. Without the camels, the finding and proving of the country, the laying down of the telegraph line and the railways, and the putting down of the bores (wells) upon the long cattle tracks, would have been without end. It was the port to which the Afghans came to drive the camel trains, and if they hadn't come there would have been no spreading palms about many a lonely desert "soak"; no prayer mats; no mosques in remote places, and no flashing dark-eyed girls in the little stone and galvanised towns along the railway that runs north to Alice.

Our history books of Australia tell nothing of all this. Certainly not the fact that Augusta was the daughter of Captain Marryatt, the author of *Midshipman Easy*, and that this port, to which the tall-masted sailing-ships came, was named after her. Augusta was also Lady Young, the wife of the Deputy Governor of the new Colony. This neglect is wrong, because Port Augusta, in establishing herself, established the north, the east and the west. She gave a stable foothold to those who explored and settled the condemned lands.

But the truth is that this miracle desert state of South Australia has grown so swiftly and successfully, right from the time of its founding in March 1836 to the present day, that history has not had time to

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catch up with events. But if ever Australia had a place of colour that reeked with "western" history, and a town that grew from the very stuff that drama is made of, it is Port Augusta—the Port of Camels.

From the foothills of the Flinders Range we looked out upon the waters of the Gulf upon the shores of which the town stands. It reminded us of the Red Sea and some of the stone huts with sapling roofs out on the salt marshes beside the town could have been the haunts of hashish smugglers.

At Port Augusta now, with its seven thousand people, we became part of the bustle and noise. It was a sweat-pot even on this early day in April. We were eighteen feet above sea-level and we knew it. The town was bursting with energy—great lumbering diesel road freighters rumbled past us, piled high with goods for the goldfields at Kalgoorlie and Perth, twelve and fifteen hundred miles away. Pointings Service Station with its glass front was crammed with bull-dusted, heavily laden motor waggons, some in from the atomic rocket range and some from Kingoonya and even from Alice Springs, eight hundred miles away.

Mammoth trucks, piled high with goods and enshrouded with travel-worn tarpaulins groaned noisily through the streets on their way to the big ship-building town of Whyalla, or to the world's largest smelters at Port Pirie, fifty-odd miles down the Gulf. Ships were loading and unloading noisily on the wharves, and there was every evidence of the fact that South Australia's factories were now producing £325,000,000 of goods yearly. There were mountains of pure iron ore fifty miles in the desert from here, and far out in the mysterious interior there was copper and gold and manganese. The streets and hotel bars were crowded and girls looked gay in their starched prints and wide straw hats adorned with the flowers that are always out of season.

We unpacked our vehicles in the backyard of the Hotel Flinders, named after the English navigator who first discovered the Gulf upon which the town was built. In the travel pamphlets given out by the Automobile Associations and the Tourist Bureaux, the Hotel Flinders had some most important letters after its name. They were A.C.D.E.F.Y, and each letter denoted another milestone in its history of service to the public. 'A' guaranteed that there would be hot or

## Port of Camels

cold water in all or most rooms. 'C' guaranteed that there would be a public room or a lounge or both. 'D' that children would be accommodated. 'E' that it was licensed. 'F' that it is sewerred (no travelling for a mile up the backyard) and 'Y' tells that there is yard space in which to leave vehicles. What more could we want!

Two additional cameramen, Rod Johnson and Arthur Hansen joined us at this town, bringing another vehicle of ours overland from Sydney. Our travelling and filming were to be harder from here on, and like the explorers who went from this town, we would have to "limb up" and re-equip for the long, hard stretches ahead.

We were in Port Augusta to make arrangements to film and travel on the famous Ghan train which runs into Central Australia, so one of our first moves would be to report ourselves to the Chief Traffic Manager and the Chief Mechanical Engineer of the Commonwealth Railways.

In our last mail taken at the Silver City, I had received a letter from the Secretary to the Commissioner for Railways. It was most cordial and co-operative, and advised us to call on the Chief Traffic Manager at Port Augusta, so that all arrangements could be made.

That letter gave the framework for the filming of the *Afghan Express* or *The Ghan* as it is now called. But before reporting to the Chief Traffic Manager, we decided to settle ourselves in at the hotel; find our bedrooms, and above all the cold showers; have a good lunch and go to the great railway marshalling yards in the cool of the afternoon.

In the bathrooms we found one of the seven wonders of Australia—the water that fell on our backs was from the rains that fall upon the forests of the Great Divide—two thousand miles away, and from the snows of Australia's Alps—a distance of a thousand miles. It had come to us through miles of rivers and pipes.

Later that afternoon, we all sat in conference with the Chief Traffic Manager. He made things easy for us. Instead of having to leave the train and camp with the fettlers or stay overnight at lonely sidings, a special all-purpose carriage would be placed on the Ghan and a railway official detailed to travel with us. He would have the power to stop the train at any time, or at any place, to enable us to change our camera positions, or to film the stations in the desert that were just "whistle stops". He then took us over the Port Augusta marshalling yards.

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We came to the pride of all Australia's trains—the Transcontinental: a mighty, air-conditioned diesel train with locomotives and all the carriages in maroon and long lines of silver striping. It had everything: state rooms and cabins panelled with Swedish birch, shower-rooms, dining-rooms, lounges, cafeteria and music room. The first-class lounges were fitted with especially beautiful panelling with the covering veneer built up from the roots of English elm trees, painstakingly matched.

The sun beat down upon the marshalling yard and the steel rails literally sizzled. Everything we touched was hot and we almost burnt our hands when we grasped the iron railings on the ends of the carriages to pull ourselves aboard the trains. But it was beautifully cool inside the Transcontinental, and we found it hard to leave the comfort of the library and music-room and the cosy writing nooks. We passed chefs in white caps, already preparing food for the next trip out and across the continent.

Then we visited the "Tea and Sugar Train". This is the train which cares for the people who live in the desert and maintain the great railway—the station masters, and the engineers and fettlers, their wives and families, living away in the outback.

Most of the stopping-places along the Trans-continental Railway, where these people live, are named after Australia's Prime Ministers and aborigine places. Names like these are mixed together: Deakin, Hughes, Cook, Barton, Wynbring and Malbooma. This supply train is a modern store on wheels with its own refrigeration vans. It travels the length of the line and provides continual fresh supplies of meat, fruit, vegetables and groceries. It also carries clothing and general household goods, drinking-water and firewood. The departmental Paymaster, who travels on the train also acts as a postal and banking clerk.

After leaving the Trans-continental, we went in search of our own desert train, the Ghan, named after the long camel train which used to travel under the control of its Afghan drivers, taking passengers and goods across the mysterious inland to Alice Springs.

We boarded the Ghan in its marshalling yard and were allotted a spick and span sleeping-car as well as the traffic inspector's van which was a dun-coloured, heavily wooded carriage adorned with water

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bags and a chimney. In it were five wooden bunks like those in a ship; a kitchen and shower-room amidships and at the end, a small private sleeping apartment. This van was so placed on the train that it could be easily shunted off at any chosen spot and picked up again by a following train, or locomotive.

The dormitory would accommodate myself and my three assistants and the traffic inspector, and Elsa would have the private compartment at the other end of the van.

Then we looked over the whole train; visited the wonderful dining-car and the new air-conditioned coaches, and planned the best position for our "flat top" trucks, right at the rear of the two locomotives. From here we would be able to swing our cameras free upon the passing landscapes and down the whole length of the train.

A flight of seagulls swept low across the marshalling yards. They came in towards sunset to roost for the night on the sandbanks of the salt marshes that lay about the town.

### *History in the Making*

THE next morning we rose early, to take advantage of the last full day we had in the port. There was a great deal to do. Harry had the maintenance of the vehicles to attend to and was to help Elsa check the food supplies, while she intended to buy presents for the aborigine women and children we would be meeting later on. Arthur and Rod were going to film the butcher's shop on the train as well as different aspects of the town. I set about hunting up the history of the port.

I found that quite early in the history of Australia the South Australians, after a lot of wrangling, gained control of most of the waters of the Murray and Darling Rivers. This was the price of their joining the Federation and what waters they haven't pumped on to their farmlands and carried for hundreds of miles across the deserts to industrial towns they have found in great volume underground. Eighty per cent of the state is desert, and they have put their deserts to work. Everywhere in Australia the deserts hold the secret of power and wealth, but it has been left mostly to the South Australians to find that secret.

Our journey with our cameras into the heart of Australia has been purposeful. We wanted to show the value of what the world so lightly writes away as desert, and to show the true worth of individual enterprise. We had already travelled through a land where simple things are dramatic and we had met people whose very individualism had given them a strangely effective power. In no other State of our Commonwealth can this be better studied or appreciated than in South Australia. Here thirteen-year-old Sidney Kidman rode into the "Never Never" with only five shillings in his pocket and returned years later as the cattle king of Australia. Here it was that a prospector with a wooden leg, Peg-leg Blinman, discovered a fortune in copper away north on the tough lands.











## *History in the Making*

No convicts ever came to this State and right from the beginning it made tremendous use of its small fertility. Apart from their use and control of the Murray and its waters, the South Australians offered in the early days a handsome gold bonus to the miners across their border in Victoria to secure the movement of gold and trade to their State. They quickly flung a railway up to the Silver City to capture its business, and built the world's largest smelter at one of their Gulf ports to capture the processing of all the Silver City's ore.

At once its own adventurous pioneers and financiers supported the greatest desert explorations in history and followed right behind those explorers. Men by themselves and in small groups became the masters of the deserts and the greatest individualist of all is a political figure who has been master of the whole State for the last twenty years. "Uncle Tom" they call Premier Tom Playford, a fourth-generation Australian. His one slogan has been "industrialise, and put the desert to work". He has sold the value of the desert and all it contains, not only to the people of South Australia but to industrialists throughout the world. Already the deserts have three industrial ports—Pirie, Augusta and Whyalla.

During the war Elsa and I went to Whyalla to film the story of the building of this port's first ten-thousand-ton merchant ship and its first destroyer. "Where did you get your shipbuilders from?" I asked of the yards' Superintendent. "From the desert," was his reply. He saw that I didn't quite understand, so he told me the whole story of their search and recruitment of labour. He pointed to the noisy riveting gang, working on the side of the destroyer. "A great number of those men came from wheat farms on the Eyre Peninsula," he said; "from copper and manganese and asbestos mines and from the inland sheep stations. These resourceful fellows from the inland can put their hands to anything."

Today those desert shipyards are building a 32,250-ton super tanker costing £5,000,000.

The waters of the Great Divide have been carried in great pipelines past Port Augusta and on to Whyalla, and for another hundred miles northwards into the desert to the Woomera Rocket Range. In the early days of this state the seasons at first were good and wool literally poured down from this semi-arid country, and travelled two hundred

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miles and more past the capital to Port Adelaide at the cost to the grower of £16 per ton in freight. It was a pastoralist called Hayward, who really opened Port Augusta. In 1854 his wool clip from the semi-desert country near Lake Torrens amounted to 106 bales, and as a ship romantically named the *Water Witch* had successfully landed stores at the head of the Gulf for explorer Ayres' inland expedition, he decided to charter two small vessels, the *Daphne* and the *Bandicoot* to take the wool down the Spencer Gulf and into St. Vincent's Gulf to Port Adelaide. His neighbour, Jimmie Craig, joined him in the venture and together with their bullock teams and men, they pioneered a route through the rugged canyons and blind creeks of Pitchi Richi Pass, in the Flinders Range.

A surveyor's flagpole on a waste of sand called Curdnatta was all that existed then at Port Augusta. So they stacked their wool beside that flagpole and awaited the *Daphne* and the *Bandicoot*. This was a successful trip and from then on all the pastoralists who had established themselves in this northern wilderness shipped their wool from Curdnatta to Adelaide at a cost of only £7.10s. per ton.

The following year, when Hayward and Craig and another settler called Septimus Boord and others, took their wool teams down to the flagpole at Curdnatta, they found that the site for a township had been surveyed and a wooden pub, a wooden hut and a blacksmith's forge had been built. The name Curdnatta had been changed to Port Augusta and an agent was waiting to do business with them on behalf of Elder Smith and Co.

The name of Thomas Elder stands out in South Australia like a beacon. He had his store and an agent at that flagpole in the desert immediately following the successful shipping of the wool by Haywood and Craig. It was evident that an agent for the consignment of wool and a smithy for the repairing of the bullock drays were required, and it was Thomas Elder who realised the need for camels. He not only set about importing them, but financed and outfitted many of the explorers who went northwards to find land for cattle and sheep.

Before this memorable year of 1854 had passed, a ship, the *Yatala*, brought a party of workmen to build a road through the pass and, shortly afterwards, a steamer called the *Marion* began carrying mails to the little settlement. In 1861 nearly £150,000 worth of wool was

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exported from Port Augusta and nearly £20,000 worth of minerals from the copper mines away up in the Flinders Range. All this wealth flowed in from the deserts.

Five years later the population of the port was 450 and the stark little town of mud and slabbed huts and heat and flies boasted three jetties, four large stores, a Customs house, a public pound, post office and aboriginal station, a bank, assurance and insurance companies, one hotel and a racecourse. A settlement is nothing in Australia without a racecourse.

If only the Curdnatta sandhills had had a Mark Twain—a Peter B. Kyne, or a Steinbeck helping with the bullock teams or wrapping parcels in the Elder Smith store; or if Australia's own immortal bard, Henry Lawson, had only carried his swag along the difficult trails to the early mining fields, we would have brave tales of action and drama to tell.

Everywhere I went I heard of camels and the days when the Afghans filled the streets. In the bars of the hotels I heard fabulous stories of the money that had been made by small-time miners, prospectors and opal gougers, and even by dingo and rabbit trappers.

One old-timer said his grandfather had worked at Beltana when Thomas Elder's first shipment of camels arrived there. They came into Port Augusta from India in a ship called the *Blackwall*.

"Before they came my Grandad used to pack the wool down the track from Beltana on bullock drays. There were one hundred and twenty camels unloaded here from the *Blackwall*," he said. "They went mad in the streets after being caged up so long on the ship. The roarin' forties wasn't in it. About thirty Afghan camel-men came too. The old abos of the Pankala and Wailbri tribes went mad when they seen 'em. They'd only just got used to having the white man about when these others came in with their turbans and long robes and their bowing and scraping to the sun. About the time I was born another bunch of men with their 200 or so camels came pouring in here, and more after them. They used to call this place the Camel Port."

My old-timer drank half a schooner of beer and continued: "My father came down to this port when my grandfather made one of his last trips with the bullocks and drays through the Flinders Range at Pirchi Richi Pass—bloody terrible pass that. It's just a few miles out

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from here. Too rough for camels, and even with bullock teams they could only cart five bales of wool through at a time." He told me that all the camel transport work started much farther up, at Beltana and then Murrumbidgee, and last of all Oodnadatta. When the railway was built to Oodnadatta it became the biggest camel place of all, because the camel trains to Alice Springs would all start from there.

"You were in this port as a boy?" I asked.

"Yes, I came down with my old man. It was a dusty place. Thomas Elder had a business house here with a fellow called Stuckey. Elder and Stuckey they were known as. Then later Tom Elder went into partnership with a fellow called Smith, and now of course it's the big firm of Elder Smith. They brought a lot of donkeys into the port, too," he said.

"Were your grandfather's teams carrying wool?" I asked.

"Yes, there were more sheep out in this country than there are now—too many. They grazed it right out and themselves with it. Some of the old grasses have gone altogether. But a new one called buffle grass came in with the camels. There was grass stuffing in the leather collars and other bits of harness."

He turned to me: "That's how the buffle grass came here—it's good, too. But them were the days for your cameras—the days when it was a race between the explorer, the surveyor and the fellow game enough to go out and find good land for himself. There are some names you want to get right in your noddle, mate," he said, "names of the first blokes to take the law and their lives in their hands and push right out into the desert, and right up to what is now Alice Springs: blokes like J. W. Lewis, Ernie and Alfie Giles, Warburton, Babbage, Bill Loeffe, Parkes and Joe Breaden, Alex McLeod and Ralph Milner. There's a man for yer, Ralph Milner, and what about Sid Kidman who became the Cattle King?"

An idea suddenly stirred the old fellow. He put down his schooner: "I'll tell you what," he said: "Molly Breaden is in the Port right now. She's the daughter of old Joe Breaden who once managed that big cattle run of sandhills on the other side of Lake Eyre called Macumba. Joe took up his own big slice of land called Todmorden. He's dead, of course, some time back, but Molly runs the whole show. There's a woman for you—yer oughter meet her."

I left my old friend sitting in a corner of the bar of the Great Northern.



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He must have been just on eighty years of age. I went in search of more of the history of the port. I left a message at our hotel for Elsa to hunt up Molly Breden, then I made some more calls and found out about the first camel to come to Australia twenty years before the ship *Blackwall* arrived.

This camel arrived at Port Augusta on October 12th, 1840, and was used by the explorer, J. A. Horrocks, on an expedition to the Horshoe Lakes in 1846. It was a fractious brute and one day when Horrocks was loading a gun, the camel bumped him, causing the gun to discharge. Horrocks was wounded badly and later died and the camel was shot. But the men who were with Horrocks sang the camel's praises across the wastelands from Myall Creek in the west to Faraway Hill in the east, and from Paradise Soak in the north to Mt. Misery in the south. Their camel at one time went for as long as a week without water and would eat just about everything that grew in the desert, even plants that goats refused. His great height enabled him to reach for the bushy tops of trees, and he carried up to seven hundredweight of goods and baggage week after week.

Thomas Elder would have heard these stories. His decision to import the camels changed the destiny of the whole of inland Australia.

In 1870 the first pole of the Overland Telegraph was erected and one hundred camels and many mules moved out carrying wire, insulators and provisions to the camps of workmen who were erecting the line. By the mid-1890s there were thousands of camels in South and Western Australia, and hundreds in New South Wales.

Camels were moving across the whole inland map of Australia, even up to the dramatically hidden Kimberleys in the far north-west. "They moved in and out to the ends of creation and back," said another old-timer I met in a barber's shop. "This port was busy and filled to the brim in those days," he said. "It was filled with shepherds, bullock drivers, Afghans and blacks, gold prospectors, sailors and whores."

The first ship to sail direct from England to Port Augusta was the *Ormelle*. She was 500 tons, big for those days. Then the port saw the famous windjammer, the *Herzogin Cecilie*, and the men and material for the building of the telegraph and the railways and the coming of the famous Gulf ships, fittingly named *The Lubra*, *Emu*, *Flinders*, *Paringa* and *Rupara*.

## *Walkabout*

Nobody will ever know the suffering of the people who went out to lay the telegraph and the iron rails, and to find gold in the desert and shepherd the sheep. In 1872 men who went from Port Augusta to the north spent most of their time during September, October and November digging wells to find enough water to live—then suddenly the rain came and they had to fight to save themselves from drowning and their camps from being swept away. Some of the telegraph gangs found gold by chance, but they were too busy, too hungry and too miserable to hunt for it.

Out in the land between the salt lakes and the opal fields, and in the country between the Gawlyer Ranges, the first settlers dug themselves into the ground. Deep below ground they kept their foodstuffs and wines and they drew water from the wells and soaks with crude water-whips made from saplings.

The settlers came into Port Augusta, some with money to spend at the Dover Castle and other pubs, others stony broke. They went to work for a while on the wharves or in the road-building gangs. But the deserts always claimed them again. Somehow, they found security there.

I was talking deserts to a man on the Port Augusta wharves. "We haven't got a desert," he said, "unless we go up to the bloody Simpson Desert or well into the Victoria Desert, but we've got a lot of good, dry country that doesn't get much rain and hides its water underground. Deserts are not too bad to live in and they tell me there's a million people living in the Sahara," he went on. "Do you know, away out there about three hundred miles," he pointed out from the wharves towards the west, "there are caves in the Nullabor Plains with great rivers flowing through them? You can travel along those caves in boats. Can you imagine what will happen when they lift that water from the caves on to the plains? It'll be another Murray River all over again."

Just after the first telegraph camps were put down across Australia, Ralph Milner (the same fellow whom we heard about at Mullorina, who with his wife had first taken sheep on to the Cooper), took a mob of sheep from Port Augusta to the telegraph camps as far as the Roper River, fifteen hundred miles up the continent. These people go "up or down the track" for a thousand miles. Distance is nothing to them.

## *History in the Making*

A station man will say: "I've got to visit my other property next week—I'll be away for a few days." His other property is maybe five hundred miles away. Today he will travel that distance in his car or truck on good roads within twenty-four hours if pushed for time, or in three days if on our bad roads. A lot depends on his vehicle. The discarded army blitz waggon and heavy-duty trucks with home-made raised and double springs, and even double carburettors, charge through the worst country, throwing the gibbers right and left and wallowing madly in the bull dust to reduce hundreds of miles to hours.

Land was taken up right along the Overland Telegraph, and as South Australia financed the discovery of the whole lands north of latitude 26, it controlled the whole of the Northern Territory, and its travellers joined the camel trains going north all the way to Alice Springs and paid their fare to the Afghans in golden sovereigns. These Afghans with their camels controlled all the transport until the railways and then motor transport started to creep over the country.

Good season followed good season and the average annual rainfall was often exceeded. Settlers were led astray by this cycle and talked loudly about a gradual change in the seasons back to the days of large rainfalls—when all South Australia was a land of milk and honey.

In that last good year, Port Augusta handled its record number of 48,300 bales of wool and the wharves were crammed with wool ships. Then calamity came—the seasons changed to a dry cycle. The grass withered under the hooves of too many millions of sheep and a few wells dried up. Many settlers surrendered their leases, for they had over-grazed a country that was purposely planned by nature to withstand the droughts. Of course there were those who cursed and hung on.

Then at the very tail end of this terrible period, when the rains came, Port Augusta started to build Australia's greatest railway and workers crowded into the port. Australia's Governor-General, Lord Denham, turned the first sod and the flag-bedecked town went madly gay. Destroyers dressed in coloured streamers and bunting stood in the harbour of the barren Gulf, and at night a rocket shot high into the sky to burst into a miniature Australian flag. The festivities continued through day and night as sailors and Afghans and their handsome women mixed with the people of the port and the men from the deserts.

## *Walkabout*

Soon the cheering died away as the long months of heat set in, and for five long years the seasons alternated from droughts to floods. Heavy rains flooded the quarries in the Flinders Range, from where the gangs secured the rock for building bridges and stone for ballast. King tides, ten feet high, swept in along the low-lying "faulted" land that led from the gulf to Lake Torrens, and the workmen waded waist-deep in slime and slush to build bridges stone by stone. Whole lines of old-fashioned, slow-moving lorries, bullock carts and jinkers and mule teams dragged the huge blocks of stone from the barren ranges to the line in the making. Men worked like slaves in long pick and shovel lines—blinded by sand and flies; denied water at one moment and flooded the next.

Then typhus raged through the railway camps and into Port Augusta, and the death toll was heavy. As the railway stretched out into the regions of the sandhills, long lines of camels went out with supplies. Within five years the heroic undertaking was completed. This would have made a great motion picture.

Back at the Flinders late on the afternoon of that second day, we all met up for cocktails.

Rod and Arthur had camera equipment everywhere; a new sixteen-millimetre camera had just reached us from Germany and we were eager to use it. It had special shoulder-harness for quick, steady hand-shooting and an array of turret lenses.

Excitement was high about the bar and lounges of the hotel as men and women talked animatedly over their beer. A thirty-three-year-old Hungarian immigrant had just brought in an opal worth more than £5,000 from a place out in the desert called Lunatic Hill, and it was rumoured that an aborigine had made an even greater find. A party was being organised to celebrate the Hungarian's find and his naturalisation. He was embracing a country whose toughest land had just presented him with a stone full of opal, almost as large as his head.

Then Elsa came bustling in; she had met Molly Breden of Todmorden Station. Soon Molly and her Adelaide friends would be in to have cocktails with us. Harry struggled in with large cardboard boxes filled with lubra dresses and balloons, gollywogs, jack-in-the-boxes and rubber snakes and frogs for the aborigine children.

## *History in the Making*

A big bronzed fellow of about forty-five came looking for me. He introduced himself as Norman Noble, a traffic inspector of the Commonwealth Railways, and he explained that he had been detailed to travel as host to us on the Ghan.

Then a stocky woman in a loose blouse and serviceable dungaree slacks came laughing in with her friends. Elsa introduced her as Miss Breden "Molly please," she said smiling. "Look here, will you all have a drink with me? You're in my country now."

"But we asked you to come and have a drink with us," Elsa said.

"Well, what's it matter? But you should all have one with me first—you're really guests."

Of course we were nothing of the kind. She had never met us or even heard of us before. But this was typical. She was five hundred miles from home, but as far as she was concerned we were in her country and were already her guests. Then she saw Mr. Noble and he went over and shook hands with her. I said, "You know each other?" but they were already in fighting conversation as she made suggestions for what she believed would be improvements in the railway's trucking and freighting of cattle. It was all a matter of how many trucks should be provided and how many beasts should be put in one truck. At what places on the line they should be rested and watered, and the changes in time-tables for the running of the trains. It was all cattle—cattle—cattle, and the care of cattle.

Then Molly turned to us with infectious laughter. "Oh, this has been wonderful, having a traffic inspector just where we want him for a while!" Then she asked Elsa all about her travelling: What sort of vehicles did we have? Did we have good swags?

"You must come and see my place and stay with me for a while. You mustn't go through this country without visiting Oodnadatta and coming out to Todmorden Station."

My mind went back to the old-timer in the pub. This was Molly Breden, the daughter of old Joe Breden—one of the immortals of the "Never Never". This was the woman who picked up the torch where her father put it down—the woman who still carried on and successfully managed the great cattle property, now well established out in the hard lands.

Molly Breden and her woman friends were all leaving Port Augusta

## *Walkabout*

early the next morning to motor through the deserts to Todmorden, and we were to leave on the evening of the following day to travel through the same deserts in the Ghan train. We would pull into Oodnadatta on the night of our second day and Molly said: "I'll be in Oodnadatta ahead of you, I'll be there to meet the train. It will stay for half an hour at the Datta, so you'll all be able to come over to the pub and have a drink with me." In those three days she would travel just over five hundred miles of rough dusty roads. To her friends back in Oodnadatta she would have just been down the track to Port Augusta.

Although we had dropped down to a point south again on our continent—here in this port we were on the threshold of the greater distances. Everything seemed to be a thousand miles away.

Tomorrow we would be packing and the next day we would be travelling on the Ghan to Alice Springs—just seven hundred and seventy miles to the north.

### *Afghan Express*

THE day we left Port Augusta it was bleak and windy, and threatened rain. Winter had made its first thrust at the hot lands.

We saw little of the bustle at the station because we were busy back in the marshalling yard watching our vehicles being hoisted aboard the flat tops of the Ghan train. They were pounced on by great grappling machines lifted from the ground and placed neatly upon the flat tops of the train.

It was a boon to have our vehicles with us, as it meant we would be immediately mobile when we left the train, and ready to head out to the wilderness. This has been possible for all travellers until quite recently, but now the traffic of people and goods into Central Australia is so great that a special train called the Chaser has to follow behind the passenger train, carrying the travellers' vehicles.

While we photographed the loading of the vehicles Elsa took refuge in the Holden, and without warning found herself hoisted into the sky as the car was lifted from the ground to the flat tops. The moment the vehicles were stationary, the wheels and cross-bar sections of the undercarriages were roped and made fast to the floor of these heavy, slabbed railway trucks without sides.

At the last moment we had received a kangaroo, sent to us by a young pen-friend in Adelaide. She said her backyard in the town was too small and would we please take it back to the great country to which it belonged. The kangaroo had been caught on the plains beyond Oodnadatta two years before and she wanted it to run wild again. We fitted the cage, which had its own tarpaulin cover, into a snug position at the front of our Holden car, and had it roped down tightly.

I joined Elsa in the front seat of the Holden and the crowded railway station swung past. Some people looked up at us in surprise, wondering

## *Walkabout*

what we were doing riding in our vehicles out on the forbidden flat tops. In large letters on the side of our Land Rovers "Australian Expedition" was plainly written. Arthur was busy packing his cameras and balancing himself between the two Rovers, and Rod was photographing from a tripod lashed to the side of the battery trailer.

The train was delayed as a large party of Italian immigrants was being packed aboard for Central Australia, but this delay gave us time to walk without trouble through the engine rooms and admire the power, and the fittings of shining, stainless steel, the comfort and amenities. The two locomotives were hitched back to back, but only the power of the second one was added to that of the loco in the lead, which of course faced the wilderness. This meant that we could sit in the idle drivers' seats of this second loco in the rear and look straight down on to our flat tops with our vehicles, and to Joey in his cage. Our cameras would be able to capture a cinerama of travelling—the approach of the country from the front loco; the passing country from the flat tops, and the whole train that would crawl and speed, and twist like a great snake as the country fell away from us.

How different these locos were to the old steam engines with their grime and soot and heat. There was no sweat and filth from an engine raising steam, or fine coal dust to burn the eyes. No callous, coal-grimed hands, and wind-chapped cheeks and lips. Nothing on earth would have made Harry drop the ash from his cigarette to the polished floor of the loco. He looked for an ash tray and found one.

The engine-rooms had large, round, port-hole windows. Charlie Lynch sat in his well-fitting white overalls, his hand on a smooth steel throttle, looking out through wide-visioned landscaped windows, waiting for the signal from the guard.

It came and driver Lynch put his foot on a pedal and moved the throttle. We glided out and away from Port Augusta without fuss and fume, and we swung just a little softly as we picked up speed to the clatter of the passing sleepers underneath. We noticed him watching the speedo overhead. "I can't take her over thirty-five miles an hour, the track isn't heavy enough."

"What do you mean, not heavy enough?" I asked.

"Well the rails are very light. They're only forty pounds in weight per foot, and they have to carry 300-ton locos and heaven knows how



## *Afghan Express*

heavy the whole train is. Then it must be remembered that this track was laid down with more of a thought to the distance they could afford to take it, never dreaming they'd some day have engines like these. We've got to be careful along some places in the desert where it's a bit soft or 'shifty' underneath."

We approached Minchin Wells—the springs which gave Port Augusta its first scant water supply: Now called Stirling North, it is the cattle-trucking centre for Port Augusta. Here the mobs of cattle can be handled easily away from the town and watered at the wells.

A "piggy-back" train came rushing past. Owing to the different and heavier gauges of a new branch line which leaves the central line further up, to tap the Leigh Creek coalfields, the coal train is ramped aboard the flat tops of the train with the wider gauge, and so we saw the coal train riding in on top of another train. We swung out from Stirling North and faced the Flinders Range with Mt. Remarkable looming on our right, and away in the distances the peaks of Mts. Brown and Arden, sighted and named by Matthew Flinders in 1802. Robert Brown, the naturalist on the *Investigator*, led a small party to these mountains to examine the plants, animals and insects of this strange unknown land, and in return Matthew Flinders gave his name to one of the mountains.

We rumbled towards the mountains, crossing saltpans and clay-pans and long plains of small, degenerated salt bush. We had a wonderful view from the engine. Salt-bush plains swept in an arc of 146 degrees, and if we lay back a little in our chairs we lost the flat landscape and saw only the mountains, the sky and clouds sweeping above.

Elsa sat in the assistant driver's chair and plied Charlie Lynch with questions. "Yes, Mrs. Chauvel, I can close the weather out and have vision all the time. If it rains or even snows I can keep the big wind-screen wipers working and we have an automatic fluid sprinkler which always guarantees clear vision. We have a cooling and a heating system, and if the sun should come in from the sides, we can pull down the small green blinds."

He showed us the power plugs we could use for our lights and sound equipment, and we arranged our sound-recording set with long cables leading back from the rear locomotive to our flat tops. We arranged microphones in the forward loco, in the engine-room, and back on

## *Walkabout*

the flat tops, so that all the principal sounds of travelling could be recorded.

Our arc of 146 degrees closed in as we swung and rumbled and rattled our way into Pitchi Richie Pass. Barren rock walls closed in on both sides and we slowed down to about twelve miles an hour. A group of rock wallabies sat across the rails, fascinated by our approach, but Charlie Lynch pulled a lever and forced screeching steam from the sides of the loco. The wallabies leapt from the rails and bounded in great leaps down the rocky hillsides.

At Quorn, where the very first passenger train set out in 1923 for Oodnadatta, we hung up for some time. This is a big centre for travellers by road from the three eastern States, and the most convenient point for them to board the train. The Chaser which follows takes on their vehicles.

When the first passenger train pulled out from here to an interested group of spectators, with just one sleeping-car attached, only one passenger—an Afghan in all his Eastern regalia—was seen to enter that car, much to the amusement of everyone. As the train pulled away from the station, somebody shouted: "The Afghan Express!" The train was christened—the name stuck.

I have never found out why there were no other passengers in that sleeping-car on such a memorable occasion. Perhaps it was far too stylish for the locals who were used to tossing their swags into hard-seated carriages or on to the backs of camels. It's very hard to divorce a bushman from his swag when he's travelling, and his main concern would be to find a place on which to roll out his swag. He could hardly do this on the white-sheeted and neatly turned-down bed of the sleeping-car and there were no tourists travelling to the Red Centre thirty-five years ago.

Before the Ghan crept out from Quorn, we fed Joey with bread and milk sweetened with sugar, and as darkness set in we and our team ensconced ourselves in our inspector's van. We had given up our comfortable sleeping-carriage to some Rio Tinto mining officials who were without sleeping accommodation. Inspector Noble had the fire burning brightly in our wood stove and was actually swinging an axe and splitting firewood on the hard floor of the cabin. This is the strangest sight I have ever seen in a modern train.

## *Afghan Express*

"I thought I'd boil up the billy for a cup of tea," he said. "There's such a big mob on this train that we're not likely to get into the dining-car until quite late. If we can't change over at Hawker, we'll pull the train up at Hookina or Mernmerna and then change back to the van again at Brachina or Parachilna."

They were all just strange names to us except the last one. We had been very close to Parachilna when we visited the little village of Blinman with young Johnnie Fargher and his parents.

The train stopped at Kookina, just long enough to allow us to scramble out and stumble along the dark track to the dining-car. The battle was still on. Passengers were lined up through the corridors of carriages and edged into the diner inch by inch. But everybody seemed happy enough and sang to pass the time.

When we reached the dining-car we found it crammed with the most amazing assortment of people. There were missionaries sitting with hotel keepers, tourists and crocodile shooters; station owners and prospectors; mining engineers and buffalo shooters.

The officials on the train had trouble, it was plain to see, and every once in a while some fellow with braided cap and with braid on his sleeves would come and talk earnestly with our Inspector Noble. And there were free fights back somewhere on the train between men who had been drinking too heavily in Port Augusta. Perhaps it was the men going to the mines of the American Rio Tinto Company. Perhaps it was the Italian immigrants—the Italians are always blamed for so much.

White-coated waiters handled the trays and the food and plates, like acrobats. A jolly, talkative priest was bundled into a seat at a table opposite and a goatee-bearded fellow with a pale face fell into a seat beside him. Two really beautiful, low-cut, tightly dressed girls twinkled at everybody at a table beyond ours, and a man at our table leaned across to Elsa and me. "On the hunt, you know," he said, indicating the girls. "The Northern Territory is short of girls—no chance for the hundreds of young geologists and miners and young policemen and jackaroos unless the girls go up." Then he added with relish, "Some of them don't see a white woman in years."

At another table a full-bosomed, red-headed girl placed a make-up box on her table, to the exclusion of everything else. I think her companions expected it to play a tune.

## *Walkabout*

"Well, the girls seem to be going up alright," I said.

"Who are these fellows with little beards?" asked Elsa.

"Scientific fellows," replied our informant. "They go up to study the aborigines, to find out what gives them good teeth, and why they can walk about without clothes through the cold winters in the desert. They even take up little hammers," he said, "and tap the abos on the head to find the thickness of their skulls. They never leave the abos alone. There's always some crank travelling on the train, making his way up to study the abos. They carry important papers and permits from Government Departments, and from some of these organisations which you have to figure out in all the letters of the alphabet, like U.N.O., U.N.E.S.C.O., A.N.Z.A.A.S., or X.Y.Z."

"And when they find out all these things, what do they do then?" persisted Elsa.

"Well that's when the whole thing really gets crazy," he said. "After finding how well and fit the abos are without clothes, they're immediately encouraged, and in fact made, to wear clothes. And after finding that it's the chewing of the kangaroo bones and the charcoal from their camp fires that keeps their teeth in such good condition, they're brought into compounds and fed on beef and flour and refined white sugar and tea—and the next thing you know is a travelling dentist comes round to take care of their decaying teeth. This is a crazy country, I tell you. That little pale fellow over there" (pointing out the little man with the beard), "has possibly got a bag full of little silver hammers and tuning forks. He's possibly making out for Yuendumu to start tapping the blacks on their foreheads. He'll be lucky if he finds an abo when he gets there, they're a bit browned off out there now. They've had enough."

The train slowed and sidled up to a signal stop called Edeowie, a spot on the long railway only fourteen miles from the great salt lake of Torrens, which lies one hundred and twelve feet above sea-level and all about it has the sandstone beaches of the late Proterozoic Era, in which the first undisputed jellyfish life are preserved as fossils to tell of the beginning of the world.

At the table opposite, somebody was telling a story about an aborigine and a hypnotist. It appears that the aborigine was brought into Port Augusta from some settlement, and that he had been suffering from a





## *Afghan Express*

native superstition which a travelling hypnotist had undertaken to cure by hypnotism. The strange, inscrutable mysticism of the aborigine was too much for the hypnotist and in the end the aborigine unknowingly hypnotised the poor fellow, who moved about Port Augusta in a daze with the abo following him.

At last we retired to our wooden bunks. I was awake when we chugged to a rough stop at Beltana, the old camel centre. Some fellows with big swags were bustling aboard here. I heard a stentorian voice call: "Hey! Have you got a drink on that bloody train?"

I couldn't hear the answer but he shouted back with a garbled version of Omar Khayyám's "Come fill the cup that cheers". The bushman's version went something like this:

"Come fill 'em up and fill 'em up again  
For who knows where we will get another  
Or where we'll be tomorrow."

"Now, ain't that a mighty sayin'," he shouted to the world at large. "A bloody old Afghan wrote that about fifteen hundred years ago. He musta done this country in the 'dry'."

At sunrise we were clattering along through a waste of country. We flashed past a sign which read Coward Springs, and with Lake Eyre still only about twenty miles away to the east we rose quickly, had a breakfast of ham and eggs, filled our thermos flasks, took over our cameras and when the Ghan stopped at a sign called Strangeways we changed over from the van to the flat tops. We fed the kangaroo and pulled the tarpaulin away so that he could enjoy the fresh breeze from the wilderness and look out upon a world he understood.

The light would not be strong enough for us to photograph in colour for another hour or more, so we settled ourselves in the cabin of our car and enjoyed waltzing across the great plains and bare rivers, perched up in the Holden.

There was a sense of immensity out on the flat tops. On both sides of the train we could look to infinity. A tortuous track ran along the eastern side of the rails, no doubt the old track of the camel trains from Beltana to Oodnadatta and on again to Alice Springs.

This train is the life-line to Central Australia and the Northern Territory. An area about a third the size of Europe depends upon this

## *Walkabout*

railway which sends seven trains a week to Central Australia. It takes life and comfort and trade to the centre of Australia and returns to the outside again with a rich haul of cattle; and gold and uranium, and many other precious metals. Last year, the Ghan carried 18,000 passengers and brought goods back from this still virtually unknown country worth nearly twenty million pounds.

The Ghan paused for a while at a pub and a signpost in the wilderness called William Creek. Later from this point we were to search the desert for an opal-field, but now we took the opportunity to set up our cameras for serious filming. For two hours we did battle with the flat tops and the elements and often we were thrown to the hard slabbed floor with the cameras on top of us. The wind tore at us and we had to rope our vehicles tighter and tighter and erect safety ropes to cling to.

Passengers hung far out from the windows to watch us. At one moment we were spattered with oil fumes from the diesel, and then with white talc dust from the chalk hills about the dry watercourses.

After lunch our inspector stopped the train again to allow Rod to take up a camera position on the top of the rear locomotive.

Unfortunately this prompted some fellows who had been drinking heavily to climb on to the roof of the Ghan. Their performance could not have been bettered in a circus, as they actually ran along the roofs and leapt from carriage to carriage while the train ran at top speed. Noble had the train stopped and he and the guard and two of the conductors went back to order the men back into the carriages. This called for a lot of firmness and diplomacy as half the passengers were hell bent for fun, just to pass the time away.

While this situation was being dealt with, another group of passengers emptied out on to the plain, hurriedly erected wickets and commenced a game of cricket. The ringleader was a tall, cadaverous fellow, whom for some unknown reason they called Larwood, and just when the train was ready to go on its way again, Larwood hit a "sixer" and three other passengers chased the ball out into the salt bush. Somebody shouted: "He's not Larwood, he's Don Bradman!"

As soon as the ball was recovered, Norman Noble bundled the cricket team back into their car amid cheers from the passengers and we were again on our way.



## *Afghan Express*

The afternoon was well advanced when we sighted a patch of shining white away out on the plains, which took more definite shape as we approached and became the township of Oodnadatta. This is the name the aborigines gave to the golden, deliciously scented flower of the mulga tree. The first settlers, then the Afghans and the camels established this sun-tormented haven in the great loneliness. It has a pub and stores, railway-workers' homes, a hospital, a police station and gaol.

Molly Breaden, dusty and tired, was there to shout us a drink at the pub and we met Evans the local constable, who had just come in from a patrol three hundred miles out west.

"You're going out west a bit later, I believe?" Out west! We were now fifteen hundred miles westward from our homes!

"If you should come back to Oodnadatta, my wife would like you to stay with us. We'd be glad to put you all up." That was the first time he had met us. He couldn't offer more and extra words would have been superfluous.

We packed Joey safely aboard a camel buggy bound for Macumba Station out in the hilly country above Lake Eyre, and knew he would soon be freed on his own ground.

As the Ghan pulled away from Oodnadatta, Molly called to us: "I hope it'll rain before you come back to us, then the whole land will be covered with wild flowers."

The menu on the Ghan that night could have been equalled only by the great international airlines. We enjoyed the famous fish of our far northern waters—the barramundi, and the delicious white Reynella wine from South Australia's vineyards while we crossed the dry Alberga River, turning away across a moonlit world like a long silver snake.

Later in the night we, and our flat tops, were to be shunted to the side of a ramp in the desert and left until the next Ghan. We had heavy filming to do in this part of the land, so I handed over my notebook to Elsa.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *On to Alice Springs*

I AWAKENED the next morning wondering where in the name of fortune we were. I always leave the maps to Charles, and quite early on this trip I gave up trying to remember all the names. I looked out of my window and found a small railway shed with a verandah, silhouetted darkly against the night sky. Then I noticed a man with a big felt hat using an electric torch to guide him while he opened a very large, deep box, and pulled out a fat canvas mail-bag, and a bundle of papers and magazines. He closed the lid and took the things over to a utility truck and motored away into the gloom. Ten minutes later I could still see his lights in the distance. I found later that this big box was the post-box to which all the station people came from every direction for hundreds of miles, each with their own private key.

Here was a station without a station-master and a post office without an attendant. All along the seven hundred and seventy miles of rail to Alice Springs, we noticed the guard or a mailman on the train, open up these little stations, phone ahead to report the position of the train; make entries in a book; give tickets to intending passengers; open the big mail-box; deposit mail-bags and take others out to the postal van. Then the station would be locked again and left to the loneliness of the plains until the coming of the next Ghan.

The bunk in my compartment was rather a cruel thing of hard leather, unrelentingly unholstered, and I felt sure it was made of tough buffalo hide and stuffed with the gibbers of Sturt's stony desert. I was looking forward to the time when we could unroll our swags under the stars again. I didn't mention this to Charles, because I knew he had planned to save me as much camping as possible, knowing that later we would be sleeping rough in all sorts of country.

The winter had begun and a cold breeze was blowing. Through my

## *On to Alice Springs*

restricted window I could see first light breaking in the sky and wrapping myself in a rug I watched the wilderness slowly turn to day.

Only distance became apparent. I opened the window and put my head well out. There was only our van with the great brown mud-coated water-bags dangling from its sides; the small square and galvanised-iron-roofed railway station and the tremendous box under the verandah marked in bold red letters, Royal Mail. Just beyond the station loomed a large, square water tank, slung high off the ground on thick cement pylons.

Then the first touch of the sun lit the station sign, cut out in great black raised lettering on a white board, it read Abminga. The galahs came—the mad, screeching, red and white birds; half parrot and half cockatoo, that are so much a part of the outback.

At home in Sydney, the laughing jackasses or kookaburras wake us in the morning. Out here the screeching gossip of the galahs proclaim the coming of another day. They at least bring a presence of life. Otherwise if one were alone here, the world could be dead. The galahs crowded the telephone lines which ran beside the railway. They jostled for space and swung like live catherine wheels, mostly with two legs, sometimes with one—their pink combs extended with excitement and ecstasy.

The inspector's van came to life. Charles was calling for the cameras and the pyjamaed figure of Arthur hung far out from the side of the van as he took a meter reading. "Precisely nothing on the meter," he called back. There couldn't be any meter reading for it was just six-thirty.

Then four figures, in pyjamas and with towel and soap in hand, made for the big tank-stand. Norman the inspector turned an iron wheel and a tremendous spout of water fell to a cement floor below. They signalled to me that they were going to strip and shower, so I withdrew modestly to my wooden compartment and listened to them splashing and gasping and singing under the shower. They must have been frozen out in that cold wind, but I envied them.

Then Charles popped his wet head through my window and spoke to me through chattering teeth. "There's enough water in the van's tank for one shower, so if you hurry you'll be able to have one now. We'll keep under our shower somehow until you wave a towel from

## *Walkabout*

your window. There's nobody in the van now, you've got it to yourself."

I knew the men were freezing under the tank so I rushed to get my towel and soap and almost fell over the wood heap in our kitchen. Like the rest of the van it was just an adequate shower-room. An iron floor, iron walls; a small smudged window; a tap and a rusted overhead shower spreader.

The water was icy cold and the last semblance of sleep was driven from me in those first few, stabbing, gasping seconds. I turned the tap off to save the water and hurriedly soaped myself. Then I turned it on again and it emptied a last few drops of rusty water all over me and there I stood, soaped and shivering. There was nothing I could do about it, the tank was empty—perhaps there was a leak.

I was just about to dry the soap from myself when Charles called from outside to find if I had finished bathing. I told him that I was cemented in soap and he called back to wait a while until he got one of the Ghan's big water-bags. I wrapped the towel round myself and did vigorous Swedish exercises until Charles handed in a long, heavy water-bag, something like a horse's oversize feed-bag. He suggested that I hold the water-bag high above my head and then tip it over myself. It was the only thing left for me to do, and from that moment on I had many a bath like that, out in the country where water was short or at the side of crocodile-infested water-holes when it was not safe to go in bathing.

Quite suddenly a gang of fettlers arrived on trolleys and started to unload our vehicles from the flat tops. It was all a pre-arranged scheme, put into operation by our inspector. While Charles and the members of our unit and the fettlers all worked with planks and levers and much shouting to safely unload the heavily loaded vehicles, I dressed and made the breakfast.

As the sun rose higher across the land I had noticed that the little railway station and tank were not the only signs of man's presence on the plains of Abminga. Away to the east there were cattle yards and cattle loading ramps, and still farther away a large building of some kind.

The galahs ceased their acrobatics and went out on their first feeding flight of the morning. The fettlers came to the side of the van and

## *On to Alice Springs*

joined us in a cup of tea, and I was told by one of them that when we came back to Abminga to re-load our vehicles, I could have a real hot tub at their quarters down the line.

"We'll boil up the water and fill the tub in the laundry and run a shirt up on the pole you can see from here," one man said. "You can see our huts from here, Missus." He took me out from the van and pointed down the line. "That's not a mirage" he said: "That's our place. Anyway, we'll fix a bath for you, Missus. You'll need it when you come back from that track."

Breakfast over, we pulled out from Abminga along some of the dustiest roads we had ever experienced. As we passed the big house we had seen in the distance, cattle men were settling in and big, dusty swags were being tossed on to the wide cement verandahs. An office of a kind had been opened and contact was being made with the Flying Doctor base. It was plain that a shed at the back was a store. Two fine-looking young fellows with wide-brimmed hats, obviously jackaroos, rode in at the back of the "horse trailer" driving his mob of spare horses.

We found that these were the men from Tyon Cattle Station, a large cattle holding about fifty miles to the west. They were expecting a cattle train in at any moment, into which they would truck eight hundred head of cattle.

The storekeeper spoke to us. "All the cattle stations use this old homestead as a headquarters when they're trucking cattle. It pays me to come and run the store while the cattle season's on."

"What do you do in the off season?" I asked.

"Oh, just lock the place up while the heat and the dust storms and the monsoon are on—no good here then."

"Aren't you afraid of having the place robbed?" I asked.

"Nobody would ever rob us, Missus. I hope that day never comes out here. If a man is really hungry an' 'e's stuck, he'll break in and 'elp himself, leave 'is money and a note to say who he was an' go to plenty of trouble to lock the place up better than ever."

Then we saw the cattle from Tyon advancing upon Abminga, in a great pall of dust of their own making. They were spread right across our track—great long-horned bullocks, whose breed is contradictingly known as "Shorthorn".

## Walkabout

All the drovers except one were white stockmen. This was the last time we would find cattle being entirely driven by white drovers.

We had a fifty-six-mile journey to another point on the railway farther north, called Finke, after the river near which it stands. This river rises away in the blood-red mountains of the Dead Heart and follows a devious course for a thousand miles through coloured canyons and blood-red sandhills until it forms a delta on the western flank of the dreaded Simpson Desert. Here in flood time it tangles itself with the waters of the Macumba in its last struggle to reach Lake Eyre. The Ghan could not have taken our van and flat tops as far as Finke, because Finke was without unloading ramps, so we had to motor to this point.

We swept along through red-brown sandhills and forests of mulga, with the Simpson Desert on our right. Somehow we seemed to feel the presence of that great waterless sea. Before the coming of the railway this road was the camel highway to Alice, and Charlotte Waters, which we came to just half an hour out from Abminga, was in its day just as important as Alice Springs. It was one of the principal telegraph stations and for a while seemed destined to be the capital of Central Australia.

It was named after the beautiful Lady Charlotte Bacon, daughter of the fifth Earl of Oxford, to whom Byron dedicated *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Lady Charlotte lived for some years in South Australia and her son, Harley, was a storekeeper with the Overland Telegraph. All that remains of Charlotte Waters today is the little stone toilet which stands on the small rise at the rear of the rubble which was at one time the telegraph station.

There is no border fence between South Australia and the Northern Territory and this little edifice in stone was all there was to tell that we had entered the Territory—the immense 523,000 square miles of sleeping acres which has held hope and despair for so many with its changing moods. We travelled on, through New Crown Station, where its owners, the Smiths, gave us some excellent steak and we boiled the billy for lunch under some mulga trees, grilled our steak and fought to keep the swarming flies from devouring everything.

With our vehicles and ourselves caked in dust, we arrived at Finke in good time to shake in at the one pub and have baths. We were

## *On to Alice Springs*

amazed to see the name of the proprietors of the Finke Hotel, written plainly above the door as Mr. and Mrs. Brumbie. In Australia we have always called wild horses "brumbies", and few Australians perhaps know that the word "brumbie" dates right back to the beginning of the Australian State of Victoria, when a Colonel Brumbie imported and bred horses on a wide scale, and as the lands were unfenced, many of Brumbie's horses broke away from the main herds and went wild. Mr. Brumbie of the Finke Hotel believed he was related to the Colonel, and if ever a man's name was in complete harmony with his wild surroundings, then certainly Mr. Brumbie's was.

We spent the afternoon having our baths in a galvanised bath-house. There was a full-sized enamel bath in both the men and women's compartments and they both had their "chip heaters". For many years these contraptions have been quite popular throughout Australia as bath heaters. They are quite simple things, which work on the principle of backyard incinerators. Like goats, they devour everything from mulga twigs to rags and because of this they are extremely economical. They make a rushing furnace sound, and if their helping of rag or twigs or paperbark, or just grass, has been a generous one, they pulsate inwardly in a frightening fashion and the tap has to be turned on full to prevent an explosion in the "worm" of pipes which is heating inside.

There was something peculiar about the draughts in the Brumby bathrooms. We piled the rags and tatters in and eventually in terror turned the taps full on and then stood in the doorways while the heaters guzzled their food in great gulps, and puffed and rocked from side to side.

"Give the so and so thing its head!" called an old stockman as he passed by and heard the noise. "Don't ride it with a bit, Missus—give it its head!" Then with a big "huff" the heaters expired and we had to rush for more mulga twigs and paper. And all the time the biting cold winds cooled the water already in the baths.

There was quite a lot to Finke—the pub; the store; the police station with its camel patrol; the post office; the school; the stock inspector's home; the railway station and the fettlers' quarters. The Finke was the most we'd come to since we said good-bye to Molly Breiden at Oodnadatta. Beyond, across the Finke River, the land with its eternal mulga spread away into a void of red sandhills. The little galvanised

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town sat on a small plateau of stony ground above the flats of the river and down on the flats the large cattle-trucking yards were established.

We had come to Finke to film a big mob of cattle driven in from the Musgrave ranges by the long-haired natives of the Pidjandjari tribe. There were twelve hundred bullocks and eight tribesmen under a white boss—Lyle Litchfield, the manager of Kenmore Park Cattle Station.

At last we were in the land of the aborigines.

The next day we went down to the yards where the largest cattle train ever to leave the Territory had pulled in for loading with thirty-two cattle trucks. The Pidjandjaris had biblical features, not unlike the people of Abyssinia. One fellow with a loose over-size shirt and long flowing hair looked just like a Bedouin. Another one stripped to the waist could have come from the Nubian Desert. The tremendous yards in which they held the cattle were built of the heavy steel rails from the Ghan Railway's discards. This was one material which would resist the white ant—this and the desert oak. The faulty lengths of line were thrown aside and at once pounced on. We have seen bits of this Ghan Railway on cattle stations and in camps hundreds of miles out; the bent sections of the rails welded to the front of blitz waggons used for chasing buffaloes in the northern scrubs, and small lengths used to weigh down the wires which close or release the tailpieces on the big windmills, while even smaller pieces are used as paper-weights or door-stops in the homesteads.

Charles introduced me to Lyle Litchfield, who immediately invited me to sit up on the top rail of the yard with him.

"Are you coming out west?" he asked.

"Aren't we out west now?" I replied.

"I s'pose you are a bit," he said. "Thought you might be coming out to the Musgrave Ranges."

I knew Charles was planning to go out as far as the Musgraves, so I told him we hoped to go out that far.

"Oh! we're not far out, Missus," he said. "Just on a couple of hundred miles from here." Just then the dust from the milling cattle blew all over us. I turned my back as Lyle Litchfield had done and I buried my face in my skirt until the rush of cattle had stopped.

With the passing of the wind and the dust, the black flies attacked



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again. A wild-looking Pidjandjari native with a wide band of red fibre stretched tight against his forehead climbed to the top rail near me, threw one long trousered leg over carelessly and called directions in Pidjandjari to the other native stockmen. Long strands of jet-black matted hair fell about his shoulders. This was the first time I had looked closely at a native from the Musgraves. We were to see a lot of them later.

Eyes deep-set under heavy brows, set back as far as possible from the *sug*, and a wonderfully chiselled head. He had the body of a sleek brown panther with hard-flexed rippling muscles. He turned and looked right through me. It seemed as though he'd looked beyond me for a thousand miles. Then he dropped from the iron rails and passed along the lines of great long-horned bullocks from the desert, with their staring, fear-maddened eyes and frothing mouths. They were wild cattle. They could have ripped him to threads with their horns, but they moved back and swung away from him—and he had nothing in his hands, not even a twig.

"They're good cattlemen?" I asked Lyle Litchfield.

"They're the only men we can work the stations with," he replied. "It's the one white man's job they can do best of all. The country out in the Musgraves is wide and unfenced, and the cattle have to be tracked all the time. Every little Pidjandjari child is taught to track animals from infancy. Then of course this is their country, and while they work cattle they are still able to live in it and take their long walkabouts in it. They love beef and we kill a bullock for them and their families every week."

Truck after truck was filled with great, long-horned, red beasts, and with others that were all patches of red and white. Charles had moved quickly with the cameras, and within an hour every aspect of the loading of the Territory's largest cattle train by the Pidjandjari natives had been filmed and we were on the road heading back to Abiminga.

Cattle dust was in our hair and in our eyes and ears. We breathed it in. I looked forward to the sight of the fettler's shirt flying high from the radio mast, which gave promise of a real bath.

The fettlers had stoked up the boiler in the laundry and had run up the largest shirt they could find. Charles drove me down and filled

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my bath with hot water and the fettlers to a man took their little trolleys and trundled down the line to Abminga Station to re-load our vehicles ready for the trip to Alice Springs.

It was impossible to close the western door of the bathroom against the straying goats—there was no door. But Charles did a spot of goat mustering while I bathed. It was a great round washtub stained with the blue bags and soda from many washings. I lay back against its iron sides and looked up to the galvanised ceiling, a fat gheko lizard sat there and barked at me and I wondered how often the immense hairy-chested fettlers had lain back in this tub and barked back at the gheko.

I had never quite understood why these establishments had to be strictly for single men and I'm sorry now that I didn't take this up with Norman. One seldom hears the phrase "It's no place for a woman", used in Australia; and I've never yet known anywhere in the outback that wasn't better off with a woman around. Of course there can be exceptions to every rule, but there seems to be something biologically wrong about a place like this fettlers' camp—set in a wilderness, with not a single woman in one hundred miles, unless she is black.

The next up-coming Ghan's locomotives hitched on to our van at midnight. I was almost thrown from my bunk when contact was made. The long siren sounded through the night and soon we were smoothly pulling away from Abminga.

I have asked Charles to take over again from here.

### *The Run to Alice:*

We were all asleep when the Ghan passed through Finke and by the time the billy had boiled and Elsa was pouring our early morning tea we were rumbling through the red sandhills of Horseshoe Bend.

We were entering Australia's red heart. From the air this country is a patchwork of great red scars and very little else; it is really the carry-over of the red Simpson Desert. For miles and miles we ran between the long, red parallel lines of sandhills, but by being down on the soil of the land and being intimate with it, we were able to appreciate the park-like stretches of towering desert oaks, green against the blood-red sands, and the straggling desert herbs which make such good feed for cattle.

## *On to Alice Springs*

We stopped at a signpost marked Ewaninga and set our cameras up in the locos and on the flat tops once again. An isolated range of mountain tops closed in upon the left flank of the Simpson Desert and from here on it was hidden as Mt. Ooraminnia away on our right gave great promise of the fiery mountain scenery to come.

We were barely twenty miles out from Alice Springs and driving into a cold head wind. That trip took us an hour as we hung by our eyebrows once again from every conceivable freezing portion of the Ghan. At the full thirty-five miles an hour, we hurled ourselves towards the red bastion of the MacDonnell Ranges. From Alice a bitumen road lunges northwards in a long unbroken line to Darwin, through almost the whole length of the Northern Territory.

Apart from the loading of the big mob of cattle at Finke, we had photographed nothing for days except desert and chalk-faced hills and unending dunes of red sand. Now we had the MacDonnells with their fantasy of shapes and colours—the converging roads as they came to meet our railway from all parts of the wilderness—the airfield and the pure white river gum trees, which followed the dry Todd River as it moved in to find the one large opening in the great range.

We swung into the Gap. My eyes were smarting and my nostrils sore with the force of the cold wind. This was really tough shooting.

People in their cars and trucks from Alice were keeping pace with the train as it moved slowly through and out of the Gap towards the town.

Wives were returning with new babies born in the larger towns of the south, and new settlers were arriving. Parents were out on the road to meet their children back from schools in the south. Honey-moon couples were returning. Most of these people had been at least a thousand miles away from home, and the Ghan was bringing them back.

The painted mountains now lay right across the back of our landscape. The sun was setting on the heights of Mt. Gillan as we pulled into the railway station, and the peaks of the great range were alight with flashing streaks of vivid pinks and reds.

My last impression on that afternoon was of the sandwich-man, who stood on the end of the platform near the sign "Alice Springs", advertising tours to Stanley Chasm and Emily Gap and Palm Valley. How

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modern we had suddenly become. The sandwich-man was terribly pessimistic about the flies; he not only had a green fly-veil, tied about his big felt hat and secured under his chin, but a line of dangling corks hung bobbing on strings from the brim of his hat. We all agreed that the corks could drive him mad more quickly than the flies.

We slept that night at the Alice Springs Hotel and rejoined our van on the Ghan the next day to travel back with it as far as the sign and the pub at William Creek.

Alice was the wife of Superintendent Charles Todd, in charge of the erecting of Australia's Overland Telegraph, and her Christian name was given to the springs that exist in the painted hills beyond the town. Ever since the whole area of the town has been known as Alice Springs. The river that flows through the town is named the Todd. Its source is away up in the beautiful heights above Bond Springs and from the immediate streams that flow from the MacDonnell Range. Almost all the great canyons that cut their way through the central MacDonnells provide streams to feed the Todd, but it only flows after the few storms that fall in the year.

The town is on a central plateau two thousand feet above sea-level and it has a great supply of water immediately underground, and one of the best climates in the world.

Alice is just about a thousand miles from everywhere. One could reach out east and west for hundreds of miles and not find anything much except mountains and deserts and odd homesteads and mining camps. Eight hundred miles north there is Darwin, almost eight hundred miles south is Port Augusta. About one hundred miles to the north is the geographical centre of Australia.

The great camel trains from the south built it, and a handful of cattlemen put down the first homes.

John Flynn, the famous Flying Doctor of the Inland, established his medical base there, and his remains are buried today at the foot of Mt. Gillan, the fiery mountain peak which looks down upon the town.

When the Japanese pressed down through the jungles of New Guinea and the Aussies stopped them on the bloodied Kokoda Trail and Darwin was heavily bombed, thousands of Australians and American troops poured along the Ghan railway into camps at Alice. In just six months the great Stuart Highway—Uncle Tojo's Road, as they

## On to Alice Springs

called it during the war—was built. Aerodromes followed and the population of Alice Springs grew from three hundred to the five thousand it has today.

With the early settlers the missionaries came, and they and the Australian artist, Rex Batterbee, taught the strange men of the Aranda tribe to paint. Namatijara became a name. Today he is widely acknowledged as a superb water-colourist.

Ealing Films produced the feature film, *The Overlanders*, in this country; and it was here that Elsa and I exiled ourselves for three long years with various teams of technicians to make the first all-colour drama in the Northern Territory of Australia. For six months we searched the northlands for the aborigines and the backgrounds for our film *Jedda*. Then we spent two more seasons training the aborigines, and making the film.

*Jedda* has been screened in England and America, Spain, Turkey, in the Malayas and Okinawa, and of course right throughout Australia. Letters have poured back to us from all over the world asking us if the colours of the mountains and the valleys can possibly be true.

Today the painted country of the centre is advertised by the Travel Bureaux as *Jedda* country. Making this film was tough, but worth while. Now Alice is linked by the large Australian airlines and by railway from the deep south, and by long, lonely roads from north and south. Today it is a tourist centre, both comfortable and beautiful; it has been written and sung about.

This time we only spent one night there; then we left on the Ghan to travel back as far as William Creek—from which we would search for the opal-field of Coober Pedy.

### *The Lonely Pub*

**T**O reach the opal-field of Coober Pedy we had to rumble back four hundred miles on the Ghan to the pub, a man and his wife, a big white goat and a signpost called William Creek.

The dropping back was not hard to take, as we just lazed the hours away in the van; chopped wood; boiled the billy; spent pleasant moments in the dining-car talking to geologists and the Danish author Haakon Mielche and studying our maps. We had one great map in particular sent to us by the National Mapping Office of the Department of the Interior, Canberra, entitled "Northern Territory of Australia". This map is honest. Computed carefully from all topographic information available, and from partly controlled vertical air photographs and from sketches and reconnaissances, it is the most accurate map of the Territory available today. But this great area and all the wide lands south right to the Port of Camels is still not thoroughly mapped, and lifetimes will still be spent doing it.

The only features that a map-maker can really sketch in with any accuracy in this country are the creeks, hills and the wells, which are often empty.

I think the four hundred miles of land along the railway from Alice down to William Creek are contained within the boundaries of twelve great cattle runs; these lands are so vast that we never saw one homestead from the windows or the flat tops of the Ghan, nor did we see any cattle. With about fifteen acres of land being allowed for every beast, this is understandable.

To look at the place-names one would think there were towns everywhere, but in reality they are isolated homesteads, and sometimes out-stations with nobody at home, like "Tea Tree" on the way to Wertaloonna, or wells, and sometimes just a cattle-yard or a locality.

William Creek is marked by a small red circle which means that it







## *The Lonely Pub*

is a small unincorporated town with hotel accommodation. When you see it, however, you realise that the small red circle should be quoted in reverse. It should read an unincorporated hotel without a township.

Perhaps there is no other place in the world just like William Creek; an hotel, a signpost and a big goat. It sits seventeen feet below sea-level in the basin that was once the Inland Sea, and is almost equidistant between Lake Eyre to the east and Lake Cadibbarawirracanna to the west, and the very uncertain track from the stark opal-field of Coober Pedy runs through the desert to this pub.

William Creek would perhaps be the loneliest pub in the world if it were not for the fact that the six Ghans every week pass by on their iron track to Alice Springs. I have seen people peer from the windows of the Ghan in wonderment and say: "Good heavens. How does a place like that exist?" But every time a Ghan comes in, everyone pours across the paddock from the train and as there are at least two passenger trains up and two down every week, and numerous cattle and goods trains with thirsty engine-drivers and guards and drovers—the trade is considerable. In one year the Ghans carried nearly twenty thousand passengers past that little pub in the wilderness.

We were unloaded at William Creek, where we took a fond farewell of our host, the inspector. Norman had rubbed the magic lamp for us all the way along the line, and produced the genie that halted the trains and unhooked us from the Ghan in strange places and hooked us on again. He had been a friend to each of us and had made it possible for us to secure our scenes. We would be on our own from now on. This realisation came home to our little unit as we stood and watched our log cabin on wheels pull slowly out to the desert and away from us.

Inside, William Creek Hotel was like an eastern bazaar. Beautiful hand-woven Persian rugs hung everywhere throughout the sprawling building of wood and galvanised iron. The host and his wife came from Lancashire, but had spent some years on the Persian oil-fields—and by the collection of rugs I would say that most of their salary was spent there. Never had we known such a cook. We stayed there for two days while a bitterly cold dust storm tore at everything—enjoying fabulous meals and generally taking it easy.

Outside, the building, which was flush with the red earth, looked

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mean. Inside, it was generous with its warm hospitality. Deep down below the ground its wooded cellars were stocked with the choice wines of South Australia and the best champagne and rare liqueurs.

The long wooden bar doubled as a shop counter. There was everything in the world for the tourists going up to Alice.

The bar and its "shop" somehow became part of the innermost store which sold things in bulk to Anna Creek and Strangeways Springs cattle stations, both properties owned today by Walter Kidman; the son of Sidney Kidman the cattle king. The scented hair oils and highly coloured shirts and handkerchiefs in the store are constantly sought after by the aborigine stockmen of Anna Creek homestead, which is only eleven miles from the pub, and is the centre of a great cattle run covering more than ten thousand square miles.

While the wind was howling and tearing at the little pub during the two days we spent there, the Ghan to Alice came in without us knowing, until the guard and a conductor banged at the front door, and when it was opened were almost lifted bodily in by the wind. A few hardy passengers made the distance too. A hearty round of drinks was called and quite a heavy mail-bag for William Creek dumped on the bar.

In that bag there was mail for us, sent on from Port Augusta—letters from our homes in Sydney and mail from the B.B.C. How far away all other places seemed—and were!

As the Ghan pulled away, the owner of the hotel watched from a little window for quite a while. "Our biggest problem here," he said, "is the strange characters who sometimes leave the Ghan and when it has disappeared, quite suddenly turn up at our front door. You know," he said, "there's only the wife and myself here."

On the third morning the winds had dropped and we pulled out from William Creek with our three vehicles and battery trailer on the track to Anna Creek Station. At this homestead we were able to get the most detailed and reliable instructions as to how to get to Coober Pedy. The manager and his wife invited us all to stay for lunch and he spent some time explaining carefully the route across the sandhill country. He sketched it first in the sand.

"The track will be plain for twenty miles, and that will take you

## *The Lonely Pub*

across Balta Baltanna Creek. A little broken fence runs across the road and on to the creek," he said. "There's no other well-defined creek between Anna and Balta Baltanna. When you go through the broken fence you turn right and cross an arm of the creek. From here you run due west for five miles and you'll strike another sandy, tree-lined creek called Engenina. Do you notice how all the aborigine names throughout the whole of South Australia end with an 'a'?" I nodded. Then he pointed with his pencil to the line he had drawn for Engenina Creek and said: "If there's no road at all when you cross here, keep hard west all the way regardless of sandhills or creeks. Then you must hit the stinking little Stuart Range. Then all you have to do is look for the diggings. If you're out of your course, it might take you quite a while."

"You don't like the Range?" I asked.

"Well," he answered, "it's not much of a range as far as height goes, but it has nothing on it—no grass, no trees, nothing but stinking heat."

Elsa asked the manager whether we could see the lake, which most Australian schoolchildren have to learn as the longest name on the map of Australia.

"Well, it's not right on your way," he replied. "But Balta Baltanna Creek runs into it just two or three miles off the track."

"How do you pronounce the name of the lake?" Elsa asked, "because it has us a bit tricked."

The manager looked up and smiled. "I don't think I'll come in on that," he said. "I've never known two white people pronounce it the same way, but I'll get old Yakapanna to come over and say it for you."

An old, grey-haired aborigine stockman, with checked shirt and soiled khaki trousers, walked over to us from a group squatting below a tall river gum. He rolled "Cadibarrawirracanna" from the very tip of his tongue in one quick ripple. Spoken by the aborigine it is a small, pretty-sounding name, and old Yakapanna told us that it meant "beautiful waters under the stars".

"It can look very beautiful," the manager said, "but it's strange country out there. There's just something about it we don't like."

For the first few miles after we left Anna Creek homestead we passed through good shrub and herbage lands; through flood looms and

## *Walkabout*

wind-blown sands. Eleven miles out we entered a great plain of rock waste—a country strewn with gibbers, fragments of the duricrusts of ancient mountains and on all sides we were open to the horizon.

The land here developed a patchwork of great round scalds, and when the speedometers showed that we had done twenty miles, we found one strewn with a fine, dark red gravel, and beyond it a protecting hummock of drift-sand held together by clumps of perennial nitre bush. This was a perfect camping ground—clear, clean and protected from the westerlies by the big hummock. The vehicles were placed in line for the forming of the two tarpaulined bedrooms, one for Elsa and me and the other for Harry, Rod and Arthur.

It was a clear, crisp winter's afternoon in the desert and we were happy to be camping. The big dusty, brown swags were hurled to the ground from one of the Land Rovers. Elsa came and looked down at them. "It's good to see them again, isn't it?" she said. "I'm just longing to lie back on my own camp bed under the stars again." She laughed suddenly, "The old head musterer would be quite proud of you if he could see your swag now."

She was reminding me of a story I had often told her. I had just left school in the south and had travelled eight hundred miles to my first job in a mustering camp in the west of Queensland. The head musterer, an old man called Frank Thorpe, found me looking at the dirty, patched and greasy swag, which Milo Pegler, the overseer, had thrown to me.

"You've started right, lad," he said. "You can't get into trouble with that swag. They'll reckon you're an old timer. But start off with a brand-new, clean piece of canvas and see what happens. They don't like greenhorns out here and you're no good till your swag's covered in bloody scars. Then they'll know it's lived a bit just like you." He grinned back at my full seventeen years and walked away to get his own old swag.

I've had many swags since then.

As the sun went down the heat fled from the land and we gathered the wood from a dead bauninia tree and built a good fire. Then the billies went on to boil in our first camp under the stars since we had fled from the world of little Danny O'Connor away back in the wilderness of Lake Frome.

## *The Lonely Pub*

With tinned red salmon and rice, Elsa made a wonderful kedgerree. We pulled our small folding bunks from under the tarpaulin to see the stars and talked about far-off places—Sydney and the Great Divide, even London. We were now a long way out.

We struck camp early next morning—passed a well with the remains of its water whip and followed our still plainly defined track into a world of red sandhills.

It was a champagne morning and the desert world looked beautiful. We crested tops of red sandhills with a sprindrift of pink flowing from the wheels of our vehicles. On every side, smooth rounded, sandhills spread away from us. It seemed a pity to churn into their sides with heavy four-wheel-drive vehicles, and to cut tracks across the miles of unblemished contours. Emerald-green shrubs with pure white flowers made an unforgettable contrast to the red sand. Some were like large daisies and others like soft, downy pom-poms of the purest white.

As we crested the tops of tall sandhills, we could see in the direction of our compass bearing the sand ridges breaking down just a little to accommodate some mulga trees. This scene was lost to sight again as we ran through the valleys keeping as much as possible to the clay-pan flats between the hills.

For two hours the world had seemed to be without life other than ours, and at one place we stopped and searched the floor of the clay-pan for insect life, but there was none; not even a fly or the smallest ant.

About eleven o'clock in the morning, dark clouds started to hem us in and the sands became more vividly red because the harsh sun was no longer washing out their colour. As we climbed our last great sandhill, mulga trees stood out in front of us exquisitely outlined against the most beautifully rounded sandhill we had yet seen.

An immense black shadow rose from the boughs of a mulga tree. Our vehicles all stopped as one.

For two hours we had seen no life and now this monster of a thing with wings took shape, while another black object slowly appeared with the greatest mystery from behind the sandhill. First of all, the head and then the body of an immense bird. The sky showed beneath its body and the legs with brutal talons appeared in silhouette. As its head turned

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to watch the flight of its mate, an immense arched beak completed the picture of the greatest eagle any of us had ever seen.

This was Australia's great wedge-tailed eagle, second only to the sea eagle of east Asia. We had lived in the country of the big eagle hawks of the Great Divide, but this eagle, whom many argue is the largest in the world, rose not from the crumbled lava walls of a volcano but from a comparatively frail mulga tree in the heart of the silent desert of Anna.

With dramatic suddenness we had passed from a void with no life to the land of the great eagles.

The top of the mulga tree was given over entirely to the eagles' nest. It was a mammoth pile of stacked sticks. Here the trees were only ten and twelve feet off the ground, very low for an eagle's nest, but all that was available out here where the timber is all stunted.

As we moved towards the nest the female swooped down along the brow of the sandhill and landed quietly beside her mate. They looked immense and frightening, and watched us carefully. Each of us knew that they could attack us and at close quarters our guns would be useless. We could, of course, shoot them while they sat on the rim of the sandhill, presenting themselves as perfect targets although they had shrewdly judged the distance.

It is common bush knowledge that the wedge-tailed eagles will not defend their nests against man, even if they should have eggs or chicks. This was my chance to test the theory.

The nest was so large that it was difficult for us to climb to a position from which we could look into it. It was built of large strong sticks and, no doubt, every one had been well tested by the birds before being used in the main foundations of the nest.

There were four large eggs in the nest, which was lined with dry leaves from the mulga trees and with kangaroo and rabbit fur. We kept our eyes, and rifles, trained on the big sandhill as we photographed the nest and the eggs, and all the time the great eagles whose scientific name *Audax* means "bold" merely watched us.

It was obvious why the eagles had chosen to build their nest in this country. Everywhere among the sandhills were rabbit mounds and the spoor of kangaroos. The eagles are very fond of rabbits and young kangaroos and dingo pups, and even enjoy desert rats and lizards.

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Throughout all these hills there were eagles, with their nests in the mulga trees. We turned a sandhill to find two eagles chasing a kangaroo while other poor frightened kangaroos sat back on their thick tails watching and perplexedly scratching their stomachs.

The kangaroo was swaying from side to side as it hopped away, obviously ready to collapse at any moment, and the eagles kept striking it with their beaks and talons. We forged our Rovers across the sands hard after the kangaroo and the eagles, seeing us, flew away, at first quite low above the ground, but soon banking like aeroplanes as they climbed higher and higher to join the many other eagles disturbed by us. The kangaroo went on swaying and hopping away until it disappeared from our sight across a dry billabong, and soon the eagles were just specks away up in the blue.

It would be impossible for the birds to "airlift" right from the ground much of the heavy foundation timber they use in their nests. The eagles break dead branches off trees that are either higher up or at least the same height as the nest they are building. Then as the limb falls, the eagle catches it in mid-air and continues its flight with it to the nest, so avoiding the necessity of a direct lift from the ground.

In accordance with the rough cardboard map we traced the broken fence down to the creek and found a wonderful stretch of water with black swans and ducks swimming on it. Seagulls came sweeping in from the north, evidently from Lake Cadibarrawirracanna, which as the manager of Anna Creek had said, was only three miles away. It was quite strange to see and hear seagulls out here in the desert, hundreds of miles from the sea. This showed that there was water in the lake, which made it very different from other lakes we had seen, which were all dry.

We found Cadibarrawirracanna and our curiosity of years was rewarded. Nobody had ever told us just what the lake with the longest name on our map was like. We stood on cliff sides of chalk, horribly messed with stains of rust and ochre, and below us the salt waters of Balta Baltanna widened by inches until it turned into the lake in the distance—silver white for as far as the eye could see.

There was death all along the strange sea shore. Many eagles had fought to the end here or had been killed by wild foxes or dingoes while they drank. There were rotting carcasses of wild dogs and skulls,

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with white teeth set in death. Rabbits and small birds and mice lay half-eaten or eaten and spewed out again by some monster—later we found that monster lying coiled up under a log. It was a big carpet snake (or python) with the leg of a rabbit still dangling from its mouth.

We knew from our maps that the land here would be below sea-level and would rise very gradually for almost another fifty miles until it met the eroded Stuart Range. The ridge of that little range is just slightly above sea-level, and forms the outer rim of the Cretaceous Sea.

"Well, if age spells decay, it's certainly here," Harry said. Somehow we all felt that this was a sinister land as we set our cameras to film the lake.

"What a pity we can't see a Plesiosaurus, or a giant Tythosaurus passing by; somehow I seem to expect them to be still here," Elsa said. Rod finished a "pan" shot and looked up. "They still could be as far as I'm concerned," he said. "I don't like the place!"

Certainly here at the edge to these "beautiful waters under the stars", I could easily imagine a saturnalia of the strange wild things that were changing over from fish to reptile, or from reptile to mammal, converging upon us from the endless region of salt and mosses.

We camped that night near some wilga trees, not far from the broken fence, fearing all the time that it might rain. The night was horribly still and dark with heavy cloud and terribly disturbed by noises from the brackish Balta Baltaína. The restless ground nesters along the banks of the creek and the movement of desert mice were mostly responsible for this. From farther down the creek came the trumpeting sound of the black swans, and in the early hours of the morning the cry of the plovers out on the lake.

The sun broke through at dawn and our world near the lonely, broken fence was a thing of beauty. Out from our camp the sandhills were topped with shrubs. Wild apricot (native willow) trees were still heavy with their orange-coloured fruits and Elsa called me to come and have a look at the prettiest effect we had ever seen on a sandhill. A golden shrub of wild broom had sprinkled the bright red sand with its gold blossoms and some strange beetle with a network of feet had made a most wonderful pattern in the sand.

We spent some time photographing these simple things before we



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hit the trail for Coober Pedy. But true enough, after crossing the next dry watercourse—Engenina Creek—we ran into the flat lands, possibly below sea-level, over which the floods and winds had shifted the sands and wiped away all traces of the road.

This was our third day out from Anna Creek and it took us almost all day to sight the Stuart Range. We thanked heaven it was winter, because we became bogged in heavy sand and had to dig and push vehicles, pull on ropes, or walk in an ever-widening circle to try to pick up a trace of the track. Sometimes we found a piece of old motor tyre—a bleached cigarette box—a rusted jam tin—a broken bottle—a broken shovel or the imprint of wheels on the hard surface of clay pans—gibbers moved out of place or signs of crunched salt bush. We'd find the track only to lose it time and time again.

Brumbies appeared from nowhere and two stallions trumpeted about us and then wheeling and sinking their teeth into each other's manes, galloped their mares away towards the little range that had now shown up, away in the distance to the west. The range that was three hundred miles long with opals underneath.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *Jewels in the Dust*

EARLY that morning, Harry had secured contact for me with the Flying Doctor at Ceduna, whose area we had now entered and he had arranged a "sked", as they call it, with Coober Pedy for two o'clock in the afternoon. That sked meant that I could have an "over to you" talk with the operator at Coober Pedy.

We were facing the little range when we halted our vehicles and gained our bearings over the air from Coober Pedy and the Flying Doctor checked that sked while flying to a patient. How often we had heard this go on while we ourselves were in the air with the Flying Doctor.

Some very definite features were showing themselves away over on the range; particularly a great white chalk scar like the miniature cliffs of Dover, and two pyramid-shaped hills away to the right.

The voice from Coober Pedy told us that we were in a good position and that the pyramids were actually the gateway into the opal-field. The flatness and barrenness of the land we moved in gave everything above its surface greater size. The range stood up from the plain in goblin peaks and bulging hummocks. It was a "remnant" range and it was easy to see where the rush of the outgoing sea had eddied it to its present forms. It came out of the haze in the dim north-west and ran across the whole flat world in one long straight line until it vanished in the south.

Even at this time of the year the day was hot. Elsa picked up a stone to study its colour, but it was so hot that she dropped it.

Arthur Hansen had finished photographing the scene. "You can feel the age of the country, can't you?" he said. "Just some sort of 'feel' you get here. It's like stepping right back into Genesis."

For many years Elsa and I had wanted to visit this obscure corner of Australia and as we stood there at last, looking across to the opal

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range, we wondered what our stay would bring us, as we joined a lost community of white people living in homes below the floor of this scorching desert.

We packed our cameras back into the vehicles and trundled towards the range. It became smaller as we approached it. Then the track from William Creek showed up at last. It ran straight to the pyramids. Other tracks appeared suddenly from nowhere, evidently the tracks of opal gougers searching for new fields to dig in. One lone eagle high in the sky escorted us through those golden pyramids. When we reached them they were no more than one hundred feet in height and pure yellow gravel and clays. We clambered up through a small plateau of rounded, coloured hills—some chalky white and others golden yellow—no trees, no grass.

Quite suddenly the first of the diggings appeared. The whole landscape became a pattern of holes in the ground and on the sides of harsh eroded hills. In the steep sides of some of the hills there were doorways, some of them guarded and framed by row upon row of cleverly stacked beer bottles. Others were curtained with stained drapes of sombre hessian.

There was nothing to show the whereabouts of people except these dark holes in the hillsides, or the quaint chimney tops. Smoke came twirling up from one of these chimneys, which was made of large round treacle tins. A dinner was cooking down below.

This was the beginning of the Coober Pedy opal-field—the field with the world's most beautiful opals, and Coober Pedy in aborigine means "Man in a Hole".

Our road passed close to one of these hills with its sunken doorways. The whole place seemed uncanny as there was nobody about. The doorways were like eyes which peered furtively at us as we approached. Then we saw a windlass move above a hole in the ground and we knew that somebody was working underground. Somehow we had to find a road which led to the top plateau with a store above the ground, where the long back road through the deserts came in from Port Augusta. A couple called the Brewsters owned this store. It was said they more or less controlled the whole field and would be the best people from whom to rent a dugout.

We turned into a small valley in a circle of hills, all pitted with

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doorways and a scene like one from the Arabian Nights opened before our eyes. At the bottom of the valley Arabana aborigines, with long unkempt hair and with bright red shirts and tight red bands about their heads, were watering a long string of camels at troughs beside a large underground tank.

By the side of our road an elderly, fat, half-caste Afghan moved slowly with a waggon load of firewood, pulled by a wonderful team of horses. In the background the little cup of a valley opened into a much larger valley—a long, bare flat, dotted with aborigine gunyahs and hazed with the smoke of their camp-fires.

The aborigine camel-owners stirred just a little to move their camels enough to allow our small convoy to pass. We pulled up just beyond the tank, to the accompaniment of a babel of guttural sounds and an ugly baring of camel teeth. I went over to the aborigine who seemed to be the headman, and he told me in quite good English that we were in Coober Pedy and how to find the Brewsters' store.

The store stood out like Bleak House, on the very top of the plateau that is the Victoria Desert. But it was not alone. Opposite was another store and the post office, which was run by a mission. Then there were the outhouses—the wash-house, with its big copper and a fat lubra prodding the steaming washing with a stick.

From behind the Brewsters, the plateau fell away suddenly, dropping just a hundred feet or so to the plain of the inland sea, and the immediate landscape of diggings. On the very brink of the plateau stood the privy. On the right flank was a graveyard of broken cars and trucks, and beyond in the desolation, the graveyard for the humans of Coober Pedy. A few stones and one or two sun-bleached wooden crosses marked this cemetery.

Many people have likened the whole of Coober Pedy to a graveyard, and certainly the honeycomb of holes in the ground looks like a freshly dug cemetery.

A motor freighter was in from Port Augusta and Kingoonya, and stores for the opal-fields were being unloaded. Sacks of green vegetables were a good sight. Then there was salt beef and cases of groceries and many forty-four gallon drums of petrol and diesel oil.

Crows and hawks perched on all available posts about the yards of the store, and desolate mission. Jack Brewster and Edna, his partner,

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were up to their necks in the unloading, and at the same time trying to control an assemblage of anxious gougers. One or two opal buyers sat in the store; turning over assortments of opal; and a tattered collection of aborigines, mostly children, watched the proceedings as eagerly as the crows. Across the road from the store, an old model car had a post driven deep into the hard ground between its wide-slung back bumper bar and its chassis to prevent it from being blown away.

The agitation was all about water. A gouger waved his hands wildly at the little crowd. "I tell you those bloody camels each drink over thirty gallons a day, and when they first came in the abos let them have two goes at the well."

"If they water them once every three days, that's enough for any camel," shouted another gouger.

"A good camel should go a whole week without water," interjected another. "So long as they're kept some distance from the smell of it."

Our little unit crowded nearer. Water concerned us too.

"How long do you reckon we'll be here, Mr. Chuv?" asked Harry.

"About three weeks," I replied. "That is if we can get a miner's right and do some digging ourselves; that's the only way we'll learn about opals."

"I suppose that movie mob will be wantin' water, too," shouted an old fellow from the back. It shook us a little to know that we were being included with the camels. One or two fellows turned and looked our way with big grins, and we knew then that there was no venom in this last remark. We were waiting our chance to talk with Jack and Edna Brewster about a place to camp; a miner's right (which is a licence to dig); petrol supplies and water supplies.

It was soon plain to see that nothing could be done about the abos and their camels. They always seemed to us to be a nefarious crowd and nobody wanted to get tangled with them.

"Think what the newspapers would say down south," yelled one fellow, who might have been deeply in trade with the abos.

A scapegoat had to be found. So poor old Bobo, as we called the old dark-skinned fellow with the big German waggon and the wonderful team of horses—the carrier of wood for all Coober Pedy—would have to go to enable the abos and the camels to remain. It seemed strange

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that the "men in the holes" of Coober Pedy would vote their own wood carter off the field and let the abos and their camels remain. I felt that there was some sinister influence here.

It seemed that nobody had the power to order the itinerant aborigines and their camels away from the government tank, although this tank had been put down for the benefit of the people of the opal-fields. Few of the gougers on the opal-fields had the vehicles or the petrol to travel miles into the desert in search of firewood. But Bobo had to go.

There was no such thing as being able to camp above ground at Coober Pedy. "We have all tried doing this for years, without success," Jack Brewster said, as we took up the matter of residence. "It's all right up here in a properly and strongly built house, but no good down in the fields where the winds blow the dirt from your own and everybody else's mullock heap straight at you. You'll cop the lot down there, and what's more you'll freeze!"

There was nothing else for it but a dugout like all the other people of Coober Pedy, and as this was all very domestic, I handed over to Elsa, and so a new kind of life began.

Yes, Charles was right about the "new kind of life"—but what fun—what adventure—and what a challenge to the home-making capacity of any woman!

Mrs. Brewster had a dugout to let in Brewster's Gully on the site of a ridge called "The Gridiron". It had been their first home when they came to Coober Pedy many years ago, and we drove with her in and out of the twisting dunes of mullock and white mounds of dust, to pull up before a gaping cavity in the hillside. About four feet inside the cavity was a chunk of rusty corrugated iron which served as a door, and painted haphazardly on it in white "To Let".

Mrs. Brewster unlocked the old padlock. It opened with a rusty scratching grind, and we moved forward into the darkness of our new home, about fourteen feet below the surface of the hillside and eighteen feet below sea-level.

My furniture consisted of a plank of wood stretched across two wooden fruit cases to form a table—nothing more. Along the side of the patch wall the previous tenant had shovelled out a long two-foot deep cavity, which served splendidly as a sideboard. Soon my few

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treasures: a travelling clock, toilet articles and, of course, our photograph of daughter Sue, adorned it. Smiling regally down from the gnarled surface of the opposite wall was a brightly coloured print of the Queen—cut from a magazine.

Our two folding camp-chairs were brought in and I unpacked a bright cloth for the wooden bench-cum-table. There was a stove too—an old, blackened, iron affair set into the chalky wall, with a pipe chimney going up through a hole in the earth roof. That stove must have been about fifty years old, but the door of the oven was proudly engraved with the words "The Latest".

There was a second room to our dugout which was approached through a four-foot-high cavity in the wall of the "living-room". This space became our bedroom and gained its small percentage of light and air through a hole which had been dug in the top of the roof. A few planks were placed across this hole outside to prevent a passer-by falling through and possibly landing on us while we slept.

Two of our electric-light stands, with a long piece of rope tied to each of them, made a good line upon which to hang clothes in our "bedroom". Not much luxury, but it was a home, and best of all it gave privacy of a type that was welcome indeed after a few sheets of canvas stretched across the vehicles and an endless empty plain.

Harry, Rod and Arthur camped in a nearby dugout.

On my first morning I received a call from our next-door neighbour, the wife of a young opal gouger. She came to ask if I needed help or the loan of any household utensils, and—gift of gifts—to bring a loaf of her freshly baked bread.

She wore a clean print dress, and standing beside her was her little two-year-old girl, Sue. She was a boyish-looking little mite in overalls, and with a laugh like tinkling bells. There are no friendships in the world so close or as binding as those formed in adversity and hardship. This I found to be the case again as the days lengthened into weeks and the monotony of an endless khamsin or dust storm was made bearable by our visits to each other from dugout to dugout and those happy moments when little Sue, whose sole and only pastime was that of opal-hunting, would lead me by the hand over the mullock-heaps to search for opal chips. Sue reminded me of our sharp-eyed little bowerbirds, who love all bright and highly coloured things, and whose nests

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are always littered with pieces of bright glass and the tin tops of bottles or the tops of flowers, particularly blue ones.

Sue's eyes would fasten on to something on the ground as she chirped excitedly: "Look, colour! Colour!" A little spot of opal had flashed back at her from some chip of pebble.

This was the fascination of these old "finished" diggings where so many chips of the original finds are still to be discovered, and are of considerable value.

This going over the old deserted mullock heaps is called noodling, and every day the aborigine families from McCoskers Flat would swarm out over the old diggings. Opal was at the highest price ever and some aborigines have been known to make as much as five pounds a day noodling. They seldom ever do the first hard digging; they leave that to the white man out in the noonday sun.

On every visit to Sue's dugout home I never ceased to wonder at its tidy cleanliness, particularly when I remembered that every drop of water had to be carted from the community tank on McCoskers Flat. Of course there were no other diversions, so keeping the dugout and its family "spick and span" was my neighbour's only interest and this she did with the fanaticism of a high priestess.

I found this leaning towards extreme domestic fastidiousness rather typical of outback women, one of whom confided to me that it was her defence against the toughness of her surroundings, and the outcome of her fear that she and her husband (particularly her husband) might be ensnared in, and finally submerged by the rougher elements of their living. "Men like to 'live it easy'," she continued. "They slip a bit here and there, then finally start walking into supper in their bare feet and forgetting to shave. Then they get to feel 'like a black fellah, and before you can count ten, they're going downhill, going native. So a woman must keep herself and her home attractive and never give in to the climate or the environment, for degradation can creep up like a thief in the night."

And so the civilised woman's crusade goes on—to keep her man from her greatest rival, the primitive—which fundamentally is his prototype.

While I found interest in my dugout suburbia, Charles and Harry were busy obtaining a miner's right and sinking a shaft to gouge for







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the precious opals. My part of the opal search was to keep the supply of tea going. My neighbour had taught me how to descend the steep ladder into the underground caverns, and how to sling the cups on a string to the billy handle, so that I might have one free hand to hang on with. It took a few hours before I could overcome my timidity, as the ladders were on a sheer, straight drop, which at first made me a little giddy.

On calm days I would sometimes stroll up to the brow of the hill above our dugout and look out upon a world of diggings to the rounded hills with their grave holes—the shafts mostly of lost hopes, and out across McCosker's Flat to the endless sweep of plain. What a world! Almost nothing grows here; and the heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter forces the handful of gougers and their wives—if they are married—to entomb themselves.

Sometimes I have seen great flocks of migrating birds pass overhead. We have heard the whistling ducks pass over at night, possibly travelling the long pendant of salt lakes. One day I looked down and saw Charles arguing with the camel drovers for our use of the tank. We depended upon the waders in that tank just as all the other inhabitants, and it was an arduous business pumping it out with the semi-rotary pump. Charles and Rod and Harry used to take turns at the pump.

Disliking the feeling of confinement that the dugouts gave us, we decided to erect our beds outside on a small ledge which jutted out from our doorway in the hill. The usual dust storm was playing havoc everywhere, and our blankets were blown back into our faces and our mosquito nets ripped from their posts, finally landing on our neighbour's chimney. We struggled against that howling wind for over an hour without success. My eyes were smarting with the sting of the swirling sand, and we were forced to admit defeat and carry back below what bedding we could gather together again from the various chimneys jutting up along the hillside—iron chimneys were the only things that grew on the hills.

During the later portion of our stay at Coober Pedy, I unfortunately dramatised our situation a little by developing a type of desert virus fever, which alarmed Charles and necessitated my removal to a spare room at the back of the store on the main road. There little Mrs.

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Brewster, with the agility of a lively sparrow, endeavoured to run her store, post office, and attend to my rising temperature, which was hitting the 104 mark.

Three times a day Charles, begrimed with white chalk dust, would leave his opal gouging and filming to motor up to the store to find what progress I was making. Each evening he would speak over the wireless to the Flying Doctor Service at Ceduna, who were waiting for a signal from us to send a plane to take me away to the hospital there. But, with the wind shrieking dismally and almost lifting the old corrugated roof from my outside room, I somehow held my own against the fever and stayed put.

The nights were the worst, as the opal gougers, wearied of their lonely, womanless dugouts, would come up to the store for a little homely companionship. They would all park themselves in Mrs. Brewster's kitchen, and judging from the loud and continued laughter the stories must have been bawdy ones. However, these fellows were mostly kind and courteous to women, and when Charles told them that I was ill and occupying the back room out from the kitchen, they abandoned their social evenings and sent a deputation of four rugged men to stand bashfully outside my door, grinning sheepishly and offering apologies.

One carried a bottle of brandy with "Agnes" stamped upon the label. This, he declared, would have me "fightin' fit" in no time. I didn't like to hurt his feelings, so accepted his gift. The second fellow placed a small square box gingerly on the foot of my bed: "Thought I'd lend yer this to have a look at, Missus," he said. "It's a real beaut. I turned down six hundred quid from a Sydney opal dealer the other day—reckon I'll get a thousand if I can hold out long enough."

With a few more words of apology for their performance of the night before they moved off, leaving me with my bottle of Agnes and a fabulous opalised shell, about the size of a hen's egg. To this day, brandy in our home is always referred to as "Agnes". Later in the day when Charles arrived to enquire about my progress, his eyes nearly popped out at the sight of that breath-taking opal resting casually on the old grey blanket of my bed.

My temperature was dropping steadily and fortunately the Flying Doctor's plane was not required. So, after feasting his eyes upon the

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glory of the opal, Charles hurried back to the field with renewed energy and hope. Even if we couldn't find a big shell we might find an opalised periwinkle.

The day came when Elsa was back on the field with us and climbing down the ladder with billies of tea. We had unearthed a vein of a kind which looked to us as though it might contain opal as there was a showing of colour.

Our lighting equipment was installed down the shaft and I was photographed gouging out broken pieces of "potch" with a showing of colour, but no true opal. But our endeavours had brought many interested gougers to come and advise us and show us samples of their own findings. They told us all they knew about opals and fascinating stories about the history of Coober Pedy, which all began by a drover of horses digging for water and finding opals instead.

There was the well-educated old fellow who came to show us his little treasure—a round, pale opal with water imprisoned within it. It was just like a very beautiful little spirit level, and he told us that these finds were very rare. He explained to us that opal is ninety per cent pure silica and ten per cent water, and that the colours are not really in it but are caused by the splitting of the spectrum.

It would appear that the opal contains through its structure of silica, a whole number of spectrums that have been fractured millions of years ago by the sudden change from heat to cold, and so produce numbers of prisms, which, of course, are most actively producing all the colours. Can it be wondered that the opal is the one precious stone that man can never reproduce, or even closely imitate?

The old gouger squatted in the dust beside our shaft. He swung his arm round in a great half-circle. "Some people say this is all ugly," he said, "this desert. It's a bloody lie. They should be here in the summer at the end of a day that's nearly cooked us, even underground. Then the desert catches fire. Even the big white clouds in the sky suddenly catch alight, and the hills over there past Oolgelima Creek turn purple, while the whole sky's alight with red and gold above them. Then night comes—and it all goes. But we've got it always in the opal. The opal, because it belongs to this country, has captured the beauty of the country that's given it birth: the fiery clouds; the purple on

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those hills, even the stars of the Southern Cross at night. They're kept forever in an opal."

The old fellow took quite a large, fiery opal from his calico bag. He was holding it up to catch the light. He spoke in a dissociated way: "That's the spectrum splitting now, as I turn it into the sun. See, it will split even if I turn it away from the sun, and even the duller light rays will split in an opal like this one from Lightning Ridge. I've called this the Red Goddess."

Elsa, enraptured with its beauty, had hardly heard him. She handed me the little opal with the imprisoned water. To me this held the greatest wonder of all. Here in a land without surface water, without even the hint of moisture above the ground, had been found a crystal millions of years old, containing water.

I thought of the grains of wheat which Elsa and I had seen in Tutankhamen's tomb in the great museum in Cairo and how, when out of curiosity and scientific interest some of these grains were sown in the ground, they came to life after thousands of years and produced good wheat. Thousands of generations of man had passed on, yet life was existent in a grain of wheat.

We were on the point of asking the old fellow's opinion of how this water was trapped and why the heat and other conditions did not dissolve it, when, without any warning a whirlwind, or as they are called in Australia, a "willie willie" burst upon us, having swept around into our little valley from the direction of McCosker's Flat. The gouger only had time to hug his precious calico bag to his body and turn his back to the oncoming dust.

Elsa and I threw ourselves against the sandstone wall which led to our dugout and a small group of aborigines, who had been noodling near our shaft, threw themselves to the ground. For a few seconds we were bombarded with sand, sharp pebbles, old rusty jam tins, paper and rags and hoop-iron from broken kegs.

The whirlwind swept away from us up the hill towards the plateau with the Brewsters' store. We turned from the wall to find each other looking as though we'd been in a flour-bag fight. We were covered from head to feet in white dust.

We all stood, aborigines, dogs and all, shaking ourselves. An aborigine lad was coming towards us from the brow of the hill carrying one

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of their mangy dogs. The dog was whimpering and shivering with fright. It had been lifted bodily and carried for some distance, and eventually it had been flung from the centre of the "willie willie" by swift centrifugal action. It wasn't badly hurt, only bruised and frightened.

The rest of the aborigines suddenly burst into furious jabbering and ran helter-skelter down the hillside. They had seen the "willie willie" hit their camp of gunyahs down on the flat. Wreckage was everywhere and they rushed about claiming their own roof tops and the flotsam and jetsam of their belongings. The noodlers knew they had better hurry to lay claim to their possessions. Such is the avariciousness of McCosker's Flat.

That night we brought Mrs. Brewster and our old gouger and Jack Brewster together in our dugout on the Gridiron. We felt that they would teach us all we were ever likely to learn about opals.

Where did the opal come from? How was it formed? And how long ago? The old gouger opened proceedings:

"My old home State of Queensland was where the first Australian opals were found. The first mine was the Aladdin and the money to float it was raised in London some eighty years ago. Then someone went shooting kangaroos away out on the long plains from the Darling River and found opal at what is now White Cliffs and the biggest opal-field in the world. I learned more about opal on the White Cliffs field than anywhere else, because the geologists and buyers from all over the world would come there. It was a great crustaceous old sea out there, with the geologists crowding in to study the age of Australia by the things we'd find. We dug up opalised shells and opalised wood and opalised bones and pineapples."

"What are pineapples?" Elsa asked.

"They are rough junks of gypsum crystal, spiked all over," he said. "Well, we dug up tusks and the vertebrae joints of big animals which showed that those little dry plateaux past the Darling were the eastern shores of the great inland sea, and we're on the western shores here at Coober Pedy."

"Were the bones of these great beasts completely opalised?" I asked

"Oh yes, they were pure opal, beautiful opal, and good specimens of joints, too. Many of them are in our museums now. The most

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wonderful specimen ever found was the opal skeleton of the Plesiosaurus, the extinct sea reptile, about five feet long. But this was just a baby Plesiosaurus, as geologists tell us that they have proof of it growing to a length of from 10 to 40 feet. When they found that fossil I got a great idea, but nobody would listen to me," the old gouger said, bringing his bony fist down on our table. "I wanted to piece all the bits of the Plesiosaurus together with wire. Then I would have travelled him throughout the world and made a fortune for a syndicate, which we could have formed. Fancy exhibiting a Plesiosaurus all made of beautiful fiery opal. The world would have gone mad."

We all agreed that the old fellow's idea was a sound one.

"What happened in the end to the opalised Plesiosaurus?" Elsa asked.

"It was broken up and sold in bits for rings," he said, with the utmost disgust. He then produced opalised trigonia shells and mussels and pieces of opalised wood.

Mrs. Brewster explained how the wood was only partly opalised, which seemed to point to a conflict between the processes which turn things to stone and the influences of the liquified opal. She put her thumbnail under actual splinters which were still existing in the pieces of wood, and this led her to tell us the story of the birth of the opal—a story which had come to her through the years from the geologists and mineralogists, who had come to study on the field.

We listened to a gigantic drama of geological events from a time when immense mountain ranges skirted the big inland sea, particularly to the east and west, and how the vast basin of which Coober Pedy is on the western rim, was, throughout some million years gradually pushed up with the waters and its clays and sands reclaimed. With the settling down of the area a crust was formed over the surface of the land, known as desert sandstone. This crust has an average thickness of about 25 feet, and under this sandstone is the opal dirt with a thickness of about 5 feet. Below this is a bed of clay, in which opal can be found, and beneath this again comes the last and toughest layer of sandstone, which can contain silica and gypsum crystal. This is known as the bandstone. Opal is found under the bandstone, and where this formation strictly prevails the hard bandstone is used by the gougers as a roof to the shafts.



## *Jewels in the Dust*

Away down below the old sea bed there is the volcanic rock of another era, and it was from here that the opal came. In these volcanic depths the silica and water in solution generated boiling heat, like the water from the geysers in New Zealand, and when movements in the outer crusts of the earth formed cracks of vertical seams, the boiling hot silica in solution rushed up through these cracks until it met the cold crust of desert sandstone, where it spread in veins underneath and cooling off left the seams of opal.

Actually the opal in solution found the lines of least resistance within the sandstone and followed the vertical cracks, forming seams of opal at different levels. Sometimes it reached the surface and because of this it has made its presence known to those lucky enough to stumble on to the outcrop. In its progress upwards through the old sea-bed it made contact with and opalised the wood from the ancient forests and the extinct animal and marine life of the area of the great inland sea.

It was strange to think that we were sitting with the members of our little film unit, in a dugout eighteen feet below sea-level, and sleeping on these cold winter nights in a sea-bed which housed the remains of our ancient marine and animal life, all preserved in the splendour of opal.

Over the days that remained to us at Coober Pedy, we visited other parts of the field and the shafts of many gougers and their wives. Some had made lots of money and mostly spent it all, and lived on in their dugouts. There were many who had struck just enough opal to be able to carry on living and eternally digging. Then there were others who collected their old-age pensions, and even invalid pensions, and lived out the rest of their days encased like troglodytes in the sands of the ancient sea, forgotten by the world, sometimes even forgotten by Coober Pedy itself.

We learned of the vagaries and the terrible uncertainties of the opal flow. It was not like a reef or vein of gold that held to its course and had direction. Opal would show up only to stop suddenly in its tracks, or turn and dip vertically and of course it only showed up in the potch hills of the range at those places where there were cracks in the thick sandstone.

The clay in which opal is found is often alluded to as potch, but potch can take a more definite crystal form and can show colour and

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even turn to opal, so it can be "potch" one moment and opal the next.

We found lonely fellows with little grinding and cutting machines installed in their dugouts, and sometimes in fine weather, outside their dugouts. They would while away the hours cutting and polishing their opal finds. They attach the opal with sealing wax to the end of a short stick like a large pencil, which they call a "dop stick", and by holding the face of the opal against the cutting or polishing wheel, and turning the dop stick shrewdly in their fingers, they shape and polish the opal.

Every once in a while a buyer comes round to visit all the dugouts, or the gouger can take his opal to the store and make a deal with Mrs. Brewster and cut it out in groceries.

Once we found just one man in a field of deserted diggings. Not a sound came from hundreds of open shafts that lay all about him, gaping up to the sun. Only the sound of the wind howling across the mullock heaps and the clash of a door which had once been a neighbour's as it swung from a gaping hole in the hillside.

There were other fields, further along the range to the north—the Eight Mile and the Seventeen Mile, and they were much the same.

It all spelt loneliness to us.

Always below us was the flat with the aborigines living with their dogs in the most dreadful hovels of sacks and saplings and trading the results of their scavenging of the mullock heaps, gambling and coming to the mission store for their hand-outs of food.

When night comes to Coober Pedy there are no lights to guide one to the friendly cabin, and the kerosene lamps burn dimly twenty feet under the ground or deep in a hillside. If a radio or a gramophone plays it is never heard above the ground. Only the wind is heard and the howling of the dogs down on the flat.

Our inexorable schedule caught up with us. We had experienced just a little of the life of the opal gouger and had filmed the life and work of Coober Pedy, and known the kindness of the people of the opal-field. So we packed and joined the small but constant stream of dusty travellers and battlers who take the back road—the only through road in South Australia that leads to the Northern Territory.

### *The Tribal Dance*

THE land rose before us into small red hillocks and outcrops of strange rocks through which fine pine trees grew. It was different to any other scenery in Australia, and others before us have likened it to Thuringia or Tyrol. A blue line of distant hills rose above the horizon of grey mulga, and we knew that this was the Musgrave Range and that soon we would find Kenmore Park, the home of Lyle and Lois Litchfield.

Bearded Pidjandjari natives with camels looked quite biblical as they moved silently through the red sands. It was plain to see that they were station blacks on "walkabout" as the men were dressed either in long khaki trousers and bare from the waist up, or in shirt only which barely hid their manhood. The tribal aborigine has no real use for our clothes and wears them only out of deference to the white station people, or as I have often found to be the case, to create distinction among themselves.

Two of the younger lubras (girls) were quite nude except for bright combs in their hair and one comely little creature rushed in all shyness to the side of one of the camels and commenced to tug furiously at some clothes tucked away in a dirty sugar bag. She was strong and wild and wiry, as she hung her full naked length from the plunging side of the camel, holding tight to the sugar bag.

While this was going on a nuggetty aborigine man in long, dirty trousers and carrying three long hunting spears, advanced to where Charles had stopped our car. It is always customary for travellers to stop and pass the queries of the day to one other, whether black or white. Deep in the bush, a stranger is expected to say where he is going.

The Pidjandjari stood before us, greasy and smelling of goanna fat, the band of fine red fibre stretched tight across his forehead. Charles

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asked the way to Kenmore Park and he told us that our track was right: "Him pretty close up now—round big fellow hill".

Meanwhile, little Eve in the background had produced a tattered blue blouse that her white Missus had no doubt discarded. It had one button left and this fastened above her navel. Then she moved well into the background with the other lubras, who were giggling and laughing into their hands.

As we passed the little tattered caravan, we noticed the skinned and bloodied carcasses of rabbits, and one small kangaroo, hanging from the sides of two camels whose backs were piled high with scraps of old tarpaulins and sacking and kerosene tins. A cloud of small sticky flies swarmed about each camel.

We moved on with the realization that this was where the great camel invasion of Australia had ended—here in the wilderness of the Pidjandjari, and then we saw the sun lighting the roofs of the Kenmore Park homestead.

Kenmore Park and Everard Park are the two stations farthest out in the very heart of Australia. The first is mothered by Lois Litchfield, a woman born and bred to the outback, and the second, which we would visit next, by Helen Jocelyn, a pretty young stripling who was once a movie star.

Kenmore Park was a proper "gooseberry pie" place. This means a homestead where the people put the billy on the moment they hear the dogs bark! And sure enough, as Lois Litchfield came out to greet us, she said the billy was boiling. After we had found our rooms and bathed, Lois made contact with the Flying Doctor to say we had arrived; so now all the outposts would know we were no longer wandering about in the wilds.

We were amazed when Lois told us that even though the nights were cold, the hot days still bred mosquitos, which might attack at night. She said: "I'm afraid I've run out of mosquito repellent, I expected some more tins two Ghans ago". The Ghan railway was about 300 miles away, yet she spoke of that train as if it were the local 9.20 to town.

Charles called my attention to the sound of aborigines chanting.

There seemed to be a great many Pidjandjaris in from the hills camping with their families along the dry Eateringinna Creek, and

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during our stay I discovered whole groups who slept beside the huge heater in the yard, crooning all through the long cold nights in a piteous falsetto. There were special songs, the *Maka* and *Zakaaba* which deify and commemorate fire-making, for fire is life to the aborigine.

Although station men of the far north will say that one good white stockman is worth ten aborigines, such good white stockmen are hard to come by, so the stations must depend on the aborigine for his labour. Today the white man and the black man are interdependent. The white man, having taken the aborigine water supplies as well as his natural hunting grounds when he came with the first herds, now provides water by bores or pipelines, and keeps the abo in beef, flour, sugar and tobacco. In return, the aborigines will work well, for they like the free-and-easy life with the cattle—they can live in their tribal grounds with their families, and at certain times take "walk-about" and go hunting on their own.

The men get a clothes allowance and a new print dress for their wives every three months. They are paid part of their wages in "finger" or spending money, and the rest is paid into a trust account governed by the Aborigine's Welfare Board, this can be drawn out when needed. The "finger" money is spent on trips to Finke, where they can buy hair oil and coloured combs and bright shirts, mouth organs and trinkets for their favourite lubras.

The success of running a cattle station depends on the white manager and his wife gaining the respect and—if possible—the affection of the aborigine people under their care.

Lois paid her girls a small wage and kept them in dresses. Each morning they came to the house, washed and put on clean house smocks. She never allowed them to handle the food—very few white women do—but they washed up, made the beds, swept the floors and did the washing and scrubbing, all with lots of gossip and shrieks of laughter. Then they went off back to their humpies along the creek. For Lois, as with every outback-station wife, responsibility never finished. Household and medical supplies must be ordered, a daily dispensary hour arranged when the natives all come for treatment, or for pills. She must know how to deal with "big stick go pokum-pokum here" (and prescribe an aspirin for the headache), or learn what to do if "bad fellah go walk-about mine bingie" (and decide

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whether the Flying Doctor need be called in for that stomach ache). She must be able to treat festering sores, advise on maternity cases, keep an eye on the piccaninnies' health and give a daily health report over the air.

She was their "big mother": the answer to most of their problems. She must even have a knowledge of their tribal taboos, and be as wise as Solomon and as patient as Job. Above all, she must have a good sense of humour so that they will not altogether break her heart. If she has these qualities they will repay her with a lifetime of faithfulness.

We were anxious to visit the aborigine camp, and found that whereas the stockmen and house lubras lived in averagely clean gunyahs, the others looked indescribably dirty. Some of the men wore their trousers tied round their necks, and walked about stark naked, for although it was a law that clothes must be provided, they could not be forced to wear them.

We offered one of the old men, Mumena, some tobacco, but he refused, pointing to a quid of pitturi, the native narcotic, which was tucked behind his ear. He chewed this like tobacco; it is made from the mingil bush which grows in the desert and if taken in excess is both intoxicating and acts as a stimulant.

The next day we motored out with Lyle Litchfield to a high hill where we could look over the aborigine reserve, forbidden to the white man. A tossed sea of mountain peaks and ridges, broken and weathered rock—the oldest mountains in the oldest continent—they glowed a brilliant cinnabar where the sun touched them, the blue valleys of haze shading to black in the sunless canyons. We set our cameras on an outcrop of red rocks overlooking the green spread of grasses, and Charles looked out to where thin trails of smoke rose from isolated aborigine camps beside rockpools that never run dry.

"We shall never understand them, that's the tragedy," He said thoughtfully. "There they are, ageless like these rocks, part of all that peace and strength, and we can't come near to sharing it . . . and it isn't only the language that divides us." He was silent all the way home.

The following day—our last—we went out with a party of aborigines. The men wanted to hunt kangaroo, but as I hate seeing these charming animals killed, I wandered off with the girls and women after smaller

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game—wichetty grubs, yams and rabbits. It was cold enough for me to keep a windcheater over my pullover, but the girls hunted in the nude. I watched one of them, Min Min, as she started to dig on a patch of gravelly ground, thrusting a sharpened stick deep into a rabbit burrow. She was a superb young native, about fifteen years old. She had cut her hair neatly about her face, and I wondered what she had found to cut it with—maybe a pair of sheep shears or discarded scissors. I hoped she would marry one of the stockmen, for then her life would be easier.

That day we filmed scenes that in a few years may never take place again, for as the remnants of the tribes move into compounds or settlements, and the white man's cattle move farther west, the black man's reserves will be finally whittled away.

We waved good-bye to Lois and Lyle Litchfield, and set off in the direction of the Everard Ranges to Everard Park. We wanted to find out whether Helen Jocelyn had any regrets about her decision to give up the cinema for a life in the bush. The daughter of a Sydney doctor, she had been the child star of *The Overlanders*, and *Bush Christmas*, and had fallen in love with the country at first sight. Now she was married to David Jocelyn, a cattle man, and they had gone into partnership with the three Ponder brothers to run a property of almost a million acres two thousand miles away from her home in Sydney.

One look at her answered our questions. As she laughed down at us from the back of her handsome gelding, slim, young and pretty, we knew she had found the life she wanted. She and her husband escorted us through the purple dusk to their square, comfortable homestead, and as usual in the outback, we entered it by the back door. The house girls watched us shyly as they stopped in their work to smile in greeting—then, as we passed through to the rest of the house, there was an outburst of chattered comments and laughter. We never knew what they found so amusing about us.

All through that night we heard the Pidjandjari chanting to their spirit gods and tapping their wooden sticks, until the last plaintive hymnal died on the dawn wind. I awoke with a start to hear a voice in my ear intoning in guttural accents: "Gubbatee, Missus, gubbatee". All I could see was a white cup, and a row of white teeth, the hand

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holding the welcome gubbattee was one with the darkness of the room. As the light strengthened we heard the iron triangle clanging and the voice of the old No. 1 house lubra calling "All about, all about—come on quick fellas—all you lubras!"

A rebellious voice called back from the distant camp and the dogs barked. The men yelled at the dogs and the lubras yelled at the men; then the piccaninnies started to cry. This was the usual salute to the day on all outback cattle stations. There is no slow awakening to the sound of the birds, for there is a great deal to be done. A property like this is not a private home—it's an industry. There are motor vehicles to be maintained, horses shod, windmills oiled and repaired; perhaps a ten-mile ride to repair a fence, cattle-dipping, cattle-mustering; saddlery and harness to be cleaned and cared for.

I seemed to hear a scratching at my window, then a little voice called, "Goats, Missus, goats!" Of course! The night before I had rather rashly promised an eight-year-old piccaninny to help herd goats. I scrambled into some warm clothes and got out over the window-sill. As we passed through the yards the dawn came up.

Trying to keep pace with Midgie was no easy task. She darted over the rocky knolls with the agility of one of the goats, prodding at them with a stick longer than herself and calling in soft, native tongue to the old black and tan sheepdog to "circle them goats", or to me: "Quick Missus—you catchem that side proper fellah", or: "Look out Missus, that black billygoat properly cheeky fellah—he killum you! May be killum you finish".

I soon learned that to "killum you" meant to hurt you, but to "killum you finish" meant the real thing.

While I was out helping Midgie with the goats I noticed two riders on the skyline, and knew that Charles was accompanying the "Boss" on his early morning rounds. Possibly a beast had to be killed for the homestead. The native boys would follow with their truck, lift the dead beast into it, and then cover it with the branches of the trees to keep the flies away. Although it might weigh 150 pounds of beef, it might last only a few days when shared with the natives. The Boss would oversee the cutting up of the beast in the meat house.

During our walkabout in the outback, we had sampled quite a variety of native foods, but for our second dinner at Everard Park,



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Helen as a joke, had prepared a surprise for us in the form of a spiny anteater.

The anteater is a rodent of the Porcupine family and has the same array of long, pointed quills, and is a rare native delicacy. Copper, the house boy, had removed the quills in the same way as we remove the feathers from a fowl—by plunging it into boiling water, and the house girls crowded round, giggling at my rather bilious expression as I watched their preparations for roasting the anteater. When it was finally ensconced in its bed of cosy fat, and ready for the oven, it looked quite like a little sucking-pig, although not much larger than a duck in size.

At the table when it was being carved I noticed that it had two layers of skin to be removed before reaching the white meat, which is like a rather oily pork. With a twinkle in her eye, Helen offered me a portion. I took a deep breath and held it as I swallowed a small piece. The rest of it I buried under a large helping of cabbage and satisfied myself with a vegetarian dinner. Charles jibbed altogether and Harry and Rod switched over to corned beef.

Word came from the native camp that a "corroboree" (tribal dance) had been arranged in our honour, and would be danced that night at "moon-up", and although we had witnessed many corroborees on our journeyings, there is always novelty in the dancing of a different tribe. To the Australian aborigine, dancing is not just a thing of "rhythm fun" and enjoyment, it is the expression of their ritual, tribal history, and sometimes prayer in movement, for the aborigine is deeply religious and a great spiritualist.

The natives were seated round the fire when we arrived, still chanting their evening prayers. Prayers to the rain spirit, and prayers to the great Mother of the Earth for fertility in their tribe and abundance in the yam crops. Their rhythm sticks beat a quiet, steady tattoo as their voices, first deep and imprisoned then rising to a high falsetto wail, filled the darkness beyond their camp-fires with the feel of their presence, and their "onenes" with the night.

I joined the lubras who sat around their own small fire at a respectful distance from the men, Charles and Harry having joined the native men around the big fire.

The rhythm sticks were silent now for a few seconds and the musicians

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holding them were as immobile as ebony statues. A deep guttural word or two of instruction passed around and the dancing men emerged from the darkness surrounding the fire. Their fantastic white tribal marking stood out in such startling contrast to their black bodies that the white design appeared to be floating in space.

There was a deep rumbling moan from the didgeridoo—a long reed instrument created from a certain type of hollow log, and used by the natives as we would the bass instrument in our orchestras. But there is nothing quite like the didgeridoo, and certainly nothing like the weird dramatic sounds that the aborigines produce with it. We were told that the players require a mighty chest and great wind control to use it effectively.

Its deep throbbing notes are like thunder through a valley, or the pounding of an angry surf through subterranean caves. The eerie pounding of it now, and the long-drawn sobbing notes made my flesh creep. I shivered a little as I drew closer to the fire. The native lubras beside me stared hard into the darkness, their eyes fixed pools of superstition and fear.

Now the rhythm sticks set the pace for the didgeridoo and the native dancers lifted long, bony legs to bring them down with one earth-pounding thump that vibrated the ground under us. The "singing men" on the opposite side of the fire joined in with an odd rhythmic panting sound; a guttural and twisted "huh—huh—huh" that seemed as if it might contort their larynx.

The pace of the wood sticks was quickening now, and the throb of the didgeridoo was more pulsating as the feet of the native dancers pounded the earth with a force that was almost superhuman. The lubras added their contribution by a wild and savage slapping of their thighs.

The dance continued for some time with complete repetition of sound and movement. It was this insistent "sameness" that became so upsetting—the feeling of inevitability that caught hold of you and held you in an emotional strait-jacket.

Envisioning our own form of dancing, with its light, springing and rather ethereal ballet movement—this heavy, angry battle with the earth created a direct contrast.

"Tap-Tap"—"Tap-Tap-Tap"—"Huh-huh-huh" and the boom of the didgeridoo. I had just about reached the point when I felt I could

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not bear another moment of it. I would scream or run away—then suddenly a triumphant yell from the natives; a high-pitched “ai-ee” from the lubras, as the feet of the dancers came down in a last mighty pound, as if to flatten the very face of the earth. Then complete silence as the dancers turned with arrogant nonchalance and sauntered away to their own fire.

The high spot of the evening was a surprise corroboree. The natives, always magnificent at mime, had evidently been watching our activities as we did our camerawork about the station and had decided to put us into a personal corroboree.

The wood sticks gave a tentative couple of taps to warn the dancers to be in readiness.

The rhythm now had changed—we sensed a wayward and rather whimsical note in the tempo, as the didgeridoo produced some comical sound effects.

A different team of dancers emerged from the darkness beyond the fire. One by one they appeared, all wearing calico strips as masks to proclaim the wearer a white man. We could not fail to recognize the first one. His towering headpiece was unmistakably a native representation of a camera. His body painted with twining and inter-twining white stripes, supposedly meant to be lengths of curling film.

As Charles did not use anything as formidable as a megaphone, and was short in build, they were rather limited for his portrayal—but from our activities they had figured out that he was the “No. 1 Man” of the team—so settled for an outsized native carrying a big stick, and with a pair of field-glasses painted with white clay upon his chest. The long stick he waved constantly during the dance in a directorial fashion.

Our driver presented no problems. The designs on the native taking the form of wheels and gadgets—painted all over his body in varying shades of white, ochre and violent red. Tufts of fowl feathers were also stuck to his shoulderblades. We supposed these were meant to express speed or flying.

I was the last to be portrayed, in the form of a short stocky native dressed as a woman. He carried a station ledger as a “script book” and followed the other three natives slavishly about their legs and gambollings—at the same time making imaginary stabs at the script book with a piece of stick for a pencil. As I watched the movements of

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this stocky, curvaceous young native, I lost for all time any illusions that I might have had regarding my figure.

It was not so much the dressing of the parts that intrigued us as the curiously sensitive mime—that so exactly belonged to each character portrayal. The movements of our cameraman were unmistakably his so that even without the make-up we would have recognised the portrayal.

Our young driver-mechanic shuffled and slithered through his part of the dance—peering under imaginary trucks—throwing himself on the ground as if under one of them, as he waved his arms in gestures of screwing and unscrewing bolts. Finally swaying and lurching round and round the other dancers, his arms rotating like wheels.

How the native portraying the director could have picked up Charles' every little gesture was bewildering to us all. Charles has a habit of rubbing his hand down over his face when a bit puzzled or harassed—this gesture the native used constantly, to the uproarious laughter of our team.

It was all in a continuity of dance and ended with a combined piece of ballet, with the cameraman screwing an imaginary lens into his eyes and pushing the imaginary camera about. The director waving his directorial stick and following the cameraman. The mechanic careering madly round and round the outskirts as I, in the form of the rotund native, followed dancing excitedly and miming copious notes.

When the first "smack" of the wood sticks and the high-pitched "ai-ee" proclaimed the end we were groaning with laughter, and the lubras were rolling about in the grey ashes of the fire—almost prostrate with mirth.

We proclaimed it a party night, and much to the delight of the natives opened our larder and handed round tins of bully beef, jam and a rare treat—lolly water (lemonade).

### *Singing the Cattle to Sleep*

**W**e left Everard Park on the crystal-clear seventh of May on our far fling to the north. We were heading once again for Alice Springs, to pick up mail and recondition our vehicles before joining up with drover Graham Shepley, to ride along with his mob of cattle.

We drove late into the night, making camp in the dark. On the second day we pulled into a little store at a place called Kulgera, and once more crossed from South Australia into the Northern Territory. On the third day we came to the Finke River, second only to the Darling. Unlike the Darling, during the dry season, it is a great sandy water-course, two hundred yards wide in places, interspersed with mile-long water-holes. In the coloured canyons of the MacDonell and James Ranges, the Finke contains some of the most beautiful rockpools in the world. While we were filming *Jedda* near the Henbury homestead, we had met a blind, ninety-year-old aborigine who remembered the first coming of the white man with his sheep to this red country of theirs. It may have been Molly Breaden's father or it may have been the explorer he was with, striking out with their animals from the Port of Camels in 1875. He gave us a graphic picture of that first impression. "I was only little fella, out looking for kangaroo rats when I see some big white balls come rollin' down over those sandhills. I think it big roly-poly bushes, then I see it has legs and come running at me. Then more come, and I think the old snake man was telling me I now in spirit country. So I turn and run and run 'til I get back to my people. Then we see white people on horses and we all run—never see such things before. But next day white men's horses catch up with lubras and piccaninnies and all our men come with spears. But one white man he walk out and hold up hand to show he no spear and my people make friends. When that good man Breaden make camp I come

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and work and my people come too." The old man laughed. "I never liked sheep, somehow it no good spirit animal."

From the Finke stretches six hundred miles of dry, beautiful country. There is no surface water at all, that is why it is called the Dead Heart. But a million cattle are now grazing here, and tourists come in their thousands to gaze on the gorges where the aborigines believed man-eating serpents lived.

It was from Alice Springs, in the middle of this Dead Heart, that we set out westward for the tank and windmill that was our meeting-place with Graham Shepley. While we waited on the banks of lonely Hanson Creek we studied the maps of the Northern Territory's Droving Programme and noted the movements of the big herds. The yearly droving of almost 100,000 head of cattle across the whole of these northern cattle lands calls for the keenest planning by the Animal Industry Branch in Alice Springs. Each stations puts its drove on the road at a given date and the drover in charge must water his cattle at the Government bores at definite dates, in order to avoid two or three mobs of cattle arriving together at the watering places and confusion at the railway trucking centres. I was interested to notice among the list of master drovers names of some of the men I had ridden with as a boy.

In the late afternoon a young, bearded stockman rode over to us. He led two spare horses, a dark bay and a creamy-white—about fourteen hands high and good-styled animals.

He greeted us laconically. "Yer won't be able to follow all the way in that truck of yours," he said, with a keen look. "Have yer got yer swags?"

We told him we had, and arranged for Harry to follow the mob as closely as possible until we came to rough, mountainous country. He would wait there for us while we rode back. As we made our riding adjustments, and Elsa tried out the bay, the cattle came to the water in the trough, lowing. It was as good a mob of young, fat Herefords as I have ever seen come out of our cattlelands. They were even in size, colour and condition—really fat.

"Don't ride in on them!" Shepley called to the aborigine stockmen, "let them come in to the troughs quietly."

He mounted his horse and rode out a little way to roll a cigarette. We followed him. It was good to sit a horse again, already I felt years younger.

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"Got any 'makings' for a smoke?" Shepley asked.

"Don't smoke much myself," I replied, "but I've some cigarettes."

"Tailormades?"

I nodded, and he grunted disapprovingly, obviously thinking it unmanly not to roll your own smokes. To take his mind off my shortcomings, I asked him how far he'd come.

"Not far, about a hundred miles." He gestured to the bare country, which looked as if it couldn't feed a rabbit, let alone a mob of cattle. "It's not all been as bad as this, though. I've been nursing 'em along like babies, just lettin' 'em mooch. We don't use our whips, and I never allow dogs."

"I like that horse, Charles!" Elsa suddenly broke in, pointing to a spare chestnut, saddled, and drinking quietly with the bullocks.

Graham Shepley laughed. "Yes, a good horse, that, Missus," he said. "He likes bullocks, so he's great with them. It's funny how important that is; get a horse that dislikes cattle and it's so spiteful and rough it has to be cut out. A mob must be happy and contented on the road or there's trouble."

"Your mob looks happy enough," I said.

"Yes, if the watering places aren't too far apart, and the water's full of good minerals, and given cool weather, they shouldn't lose condition. We'll camp them down just a mile from here on clean, quiet country."

"What do you mean by quiet country?"

"Well, you keep away from country that's hollow underneath. Sometimes we get ground with limestone under it. We call it 'stampede ground', and cattle will never settle well on it—the rumble of their hooves frightens them. They start seeing things."

Here was a man who knew his job. I was to find out that Graham Shepley was the best drover I'd ever travelled with. Just then the real music of the bush came to our ears—the sound of the horse-bells as the "tailer up" drove his horses to the troughs. He had grazed his thirty horses, which are the drover's "spares" well away from the mob and was bringing them in late to water.

We mooched along on horseback with Graham Shepley, while Harry drove the Land Rover along the creek until he found the cook setting up his fire for the night and letting down the sides of his kitchen

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truck. He tossed our big swags overboard and then ran the Rover in beside the camp truck.

We rode into camp to the sound of the horse-bells as Graham Shepley went out to ring the cattle. He had three native ringers with him—men who circle the cattle and sing to them until they have stopped walking and bunched together and finally lain down. From then on there is always one ringer, riding the cattle and singing, while farther out the spare horses feed, belled and hobbled.

It was a busy scene as we rode up to the fire. As each native ringer rode in—there were six of them—they unsaddled and hobbled their horses, put bells on them, and turned them loose to feed. Then they laid their saddles where the head ringer directed. The head ringer was a smart young half-caste of about twenty-two years of age. The cook had lit the fire to leeward of a group of large white gums which would act as a wind break and from these trees he ran out wings of saddles and swags and general camp gear. He tossed his own and the Boss's swags near the fire in case of stampede, and for good control of the camp. The head ringer had already allotted the riding shifts for the night.

Nobody undresses in a drover's camp—each man has to be ready to take his shift or to mount a horse at a moment's notice to head the mob in a wild stampede. All that a drover does when going to bed is take off his boots, loosen his collar and belt and put the contents of his pockets into his big felt hat. Unless it is bright moonlight the drover places his hat beside his swag. If the moon is bright he sometimes covers his head with his hat as they have a well-rooted belief that a man can become mentally affected by exposing his head to the rays of a northern moon. Generally the drover or stockman sleeping out with cattle, sleeps in winter completely under the blankets. Sometimes they use their saddles as a pillow.

We rolled our swags out on the hard ground on the lee side of our Land Rover well beyond the ringers' swags, and as Elsa was the only woman in the camp a section of the creek below was put aside as her bathroom to which we carried kerosene tins of hot water and arranged a basin on a stump.

In very cold weather a big mob of cattle will take a long time to settle down—sometimes they never really settle, particularly if a cold



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wind is blowing. Then a wise drover will drift them on their way at the peep of first light, and rest them in the middle of the next day.

The horse tailer came in with the freshly saddled horses for the night watches. He tied them under the gum trees and went across to the natives' fire. One by one the native ringers came in and went to their separate camp-fire around which they placed their quart pots. Quart pots are miniature billies, some rounded and some with flat sides in which they boil water for their tea. Each man likes to brew his own tea, when he wishes.

Out on the "flat", with night closing in, Graham Shepley was singing his cattle to sleep. He was singing "Good Night, Irene—Good Night". He had a good voice, which helped to make this scene unforgettable. For his accompaniment he had the soft mewling of the cattle and the tinkling of the horse-bells, and the clink of the hobble chains as the horses foraged for grasses along the creek.

Elsa and I strolled out on to the plain to watch the cattle. One by one they quietly lowered themselves to the ground. Graham rode in a wide circle singing—"I'll remember you in my dreams, Irene—good night, Irene—good night".

A big, red bullock, not far from us, turned and very quietly poked another bullock with its horns to make it move over a bit, and having achieved this, quietly went to earth—others followed suit. The bells tinkled. It was dark now and the last bullocks were going to earth.

"He sings beautifully," Elsa said. "I never thought I'd see a scene like this."

Graham was now riding on the far side of the mob where a few bullocks were still standing. In front of us the beasts were hummocked in great black shapes against the night sky. His song came to us from across their silhouettes.

"Come and get it!" The cook called from away over at the camp-fire.

Else turned to me with tears in her eyes, and put her arm through mine as we walked back to the camp-fire.

"I will never forget tonight, Charles, as long as I live."

An aborigine, having had his evening meal, rode out to relieve Graham Shepley.

We were out in the wilderness, so far away from home, yet somehow the meaning of home was even here on the hard, good earth,

right in the very heart of Australia—with our billies on the fire and the sleeping cattle all about us.

As Graham Shepley came to our camp-fire, Elsa looked up and asked facetiously: "Which bullock was Irene?"

He stooped over the fire to place his quart pot in the ashes, and grinned. "They're all Irene to me, Missus, every one of them, there are no other Irenes in this country as far as I'm concerned except these bullocks."

We all laughed and told him we didn't believe him, and as he moved about taking articles from his pack and going to his swag, he went on, "There's not much I know about any other kind of Irene and I feel a good deal safer singing to cattle".

Elsa, Harry and I then went over to the cook's table to help ourselves to a liberal dish of stew, and then with pannikins of good, hot tea, we sat about the fire and yarned while the first native ringer crooned his own strange lullaby to the cattle. His monotonous song put us on edge, because like the bagpipes to uninitiated ears, he seemed to be constantly repeating the same few bars over and over again. Graham laughed and said: "You get used to all this, in fact I'm a bit like the bullocks and if those blokes stopped singing in that strange Arab tongue of theirs, I think I'd be just as upset".

Elsa asked whether it was really important to sing to the bullocks constantly, and he told us that he made it quite a law in his droving that the ringers should always croon or talk to them. "You see," he said, "it's always the unknown that worries cattle; they like to know where everything and everybody is at night—that's another reason why I like to get a good fire burning. They know in time that me and my ringers will take good care of them, and while we're about and they can see and hear us everything is all right."

"What happens if you have a man who can't sing?" Elsa asked.

"Oh, it doesn't matter *how* he sings!" Graham said. "After all, you can't say that that aborigine is really *singing*. But a man's no good unless he can create something between himself and the bullocks."

Then as we sat under the fire we heard amazing stories of other droving days, and were interested to learn that on very cold nights a bullock turns over every fifteen minutes.

Graham said: "If you remind me tomorrow, I'll show you our leader.

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We've a good old heavy white bullock, and it's funny how the white ones generally become the accepted leaders of a mob. Perhaps the bullocks have enough sense to choose a colour that stands out on dark nights, but I can tell you that if that old white bullock decided to move we'd have a job to hold the mob, so we always keep an eye on him. During the day the white bullock will pick out the best tracks, especially if the country is rough, and the others will follow him."

Graham turned to Elsa: "They're very human animals, Missus. Once when we were moving a mob through mountainous country, I saw two bullocks, one on either side of a blind one, keeping him on the right track and shouldering him away from trouble."

He got up, took a last long drink of tea and moved over to give some directions to his men, then he excused himself and moved over to his swag. The polite thing to do now was to go to bed and we ourselves were glad to do so after a long day.

We went to sleep to the sound of the bells and the crooning of the aborigines, and we were awakened before dawn by the general activity. We had a breakfast of chops and fried onions and I went with the "tailer up" to get our horses and watch Graham count the cattle, which they always try to do as they leave each camping place.

Harry took the wheel of the Land Rover and motored away across the plains.

The camp cook would stay back and cook a damper, tidy up, and packing everything on to the truck, move ahead to the next camping place.

Elsa stayed back to watch the cook and his offsider striking camp.

"Would yer like to watch me make a damper for dinner, Missus?" the camp cook asked persuasively. "Yer might get a few good tips." Always anxious to learn a new trick or two in bush cooking, I accepted gratefully. A damper is the bushman's bread and is rather like a soda loaf. It's a type of scone mixture, and should be handled as lightly. After patting it into a round I always let it stand for about half an hour to allow the dough to relax—then I put it into the large iron Bedourie oven, with the lid tight on top. The oven goes into a large hole in the ground filled with hot ash. More hot ashes are placed on top of the lid, and finally a big mound of earth over the lot to keep the ashes hot.

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This camp cook had a method of his own, and I watched with horror as he pounded and thumped the dough—lifting it out of the tin dish to pound and thump it again with his fists, as if it was an athlete's punching ball. Noticing my dazed expression, he exclaimed triumphantly, "That's my little trick, Missus, it's the thumping that makes the difference. Just wait 'til you taste it!"

I did, and I've never been so grateful for my strong teeth—I certainly needed them. That damper was like a piece of cement and would have been a godsend to us weeks later when we lost an anchor in the Adelaide River out from Darwin.

My cookery lesson was broken into by one of the aborigine stockmen, who announced—"Come on quick fella way—all about, all about." We found that our cattle had to be moved from the water trough, as a big mob of sheep and goats was almost on our heels. With much bellowing, shuffling and tossing of horns, our cattle were finally moved on and even before their dust settled the flowing sea of white sheep moved slowly but anxiously towards the water. In the distance they seemed to sway and move like white grass in the breeze. As they drew closer we noticed that a great number of goats were mingled with the sheep.

On each side of the mob we picked out two slim, boyish figures, legs dangling as they rode bareback beside the sheep. As they drew closer we realised they were girls. At a guess I would say they were thirteen, and obviously twins; blonde and sun-toasted, with short straight hair, they lazed along with the sheep, swaying sleepily to the easy mooch of their ponies. As the sheep guzzled thirstily, Charles and I talked to the little shepherd girls.

They were both "right-hand men" to their father, as their property was not large enough to carry hired help. They almost lived on horseback and kept the sheep moving during the day to feed, and to water at the trough. At night they would empound the sheep close to the homestead, in high sapling stockades. They looked reverently up at the creaking windmill—it meant life to them, and life to their sheep. Yes, they said, they took correspondence lessons, and were getting on quite well.

It seemed a lonely life for two pretty young girls, but they seemed happy enough. They asked me about my life in Sydney—had I a

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daughter?—and when told that I had, they wanted to know what she looked like and what she did. I told them about Suzanne, and asked if they would like to live in a big city like Sydney.

"Not if we couldn't have our ponies Brandy and Soda," they said. The second twin said she didn't think she would care to swap the sound of the bush birds for the noise of trams and factory sirens. I told them how wise they were, and how much I envied them the peace of their bush life.

We passed their little weatherboard home on our way out. It was just a small place and, I would say, with only primitive comforts, but by the look of the young girls it was not lacking in happiness. But then, I seldom ever found discontent in the outback people—they have a rare sense of the real values in life.

I rode up beside Charles to discuss the long journey ahead. It would be our last day in the saddle for a while and we mooched along slowly to the easy pace of the cattle, who had come to know and accept us with the same friendly trust of the drovers and the aborigine stockmen. It was a heart-warming sight, as we passed through an opening in two mountains, to see the mob moving ahead, flowing like rich brown treacle down the ravine beneath us. There in the lead, the big white bullock was showing the way. In the distance the great plains were visible and we knew that at our given point on the plains Harry would be waiting with the vehicles. Then a four-hundred-mile journey faced us to the Barkly Tableland to reach a famous cattle station called Brunette Downs.

The way through the steep ravine became tough for a while and my horse almost slid on its tail for a few paces, so I stopped talking about Brunette to settle down to the serious side of managing my horse down the stony mountainside. In an hour or so we would be regretfully saying good-bye to our droving companions.

One of the aborigine stockmen rode up beside us and with a wide grin pointed below to a spiral of smoke in the distance—yes, that would be Harry's fire, and the billy would be boiling.

### *The Picnic Races*

FROM all points, North, East, South and West they came, to Brunette Downs cattle station for the yearly Picnic Race Meeting. For five hectic days Brunette would be the social metropolis of the cattle kingdom, the buffalo plains, the uranium mines, and the world that makes up "The Territory". It would be the Mecca of all friends of the great outback.

From the city of Adelaide some twelve or thirteen hundred miles away, and from Brisbane and Sydney came guests of the various cattle properties. They came by 'plane, by car, truck, or any available conveyance. It was like the trail of the Yukon—it was "Brunette or burst". We caught the fever and joined the cavalcade.

The Picnic Race Meeting was the one annual occasion in the Territory when a neighbour was a friend and not a blurred voice over the pedal radio. The racetrack was a circle of sunbaked plain enclosed by a whitewashed fence twelve miles from the homestead of Brunette Downs. There was a wooden hall, a lean-to kitchen, and a few open saddling paddocks. Nothing more.

Each station was allotted its own piece of camping ground where tents were put up, as well as a rough shed for entertaining. All the managers of the enormous cattle stations vied with each other in making a splash. Bookmakers on old wooden cases blithely wrote off thousands of pounds within minutes, for betting was high, and we soon learned not to be deceived by a shy looking man in a shabby coat—he owned a property that would house Belgium within its boundaries.

There was dancing until dawn each night in the decorated hall to the strains of a five-piece orchestra imported from a mining town three hundred miles away—or else friends were made welcome in one another's encampments. Pretty girls, by invitation, migrated from the south like Birds of Paradise, to dance with lonely cattlemen who

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hadn't held a woman in their arms the whole year round. Not to be outshone by the city girls, the Territory women imported their gowns from Australia's smartest salons. Even the Flying Doctor found time to bring over a couple of nurses—everyone is there, for it was the one time in the year when pleasure was the order of the day.

As we were the guests of the Brunette Downs station—Eric Barnes, the manager, was Charles' cousin—we pitched a tent in the Brunette enclosure. Next to us was a tentful of girls, and the guy ropes were always festooned with their laundry, mostly flimsy underwear. Somehow a frilly pair of panties found their way from here to the top of the flagpost on the community hall! The bachelor quarters, screened by tall shrubs, was at the far end of the enclosure, and the girls called this screen the Walls of Jericho.

Steak parties were popular with the young people. At dawn, when the exhausted musicians had staggered off to their tents or had fallen asleep at the back of the music platform, the stockmen and girls would build great fires and sit round them grilling outsized steaks. They would sing all the Australian bush ballads from "Pack me up with my Stock-whip and Blanket", to "The Road to Rundagai". Then they might snatch a few hours' sleep before the first race of the day. The young stockmen made a round of the tents to awaken the girls, and if no leg was thrust out to prove consciousness, the offender was seized and carried, shrieking, to the cold bucket shower.

This was quite an ingenious arrangement. A roofless five foot piece of corrugated iron wall formed the shower recess, and in the middle a post, from which dangled a tin bucket with a double perforated base. The bucket would be kept filled by a black girl and hoisted. All you had to do was stand under it, pull a string which released the inner base of the bucket and down came the water. Sometimes in a reasonable, if jerky shower, and sometimes descending on your head in one big "flop" like the Niagara Falls. If the string refused to work, you yelled for Polly or Primrose, and soon the smiling black face of one of the aborigine house girls would appear round the tin opening with an assurance of, "I bin fix him proper, Missus—no more muck about shower this time". If the shower still refused to work, Polly would obligingly pull it down from its moorings and bucket it over you.

Over beside the racetrack, the large community hall served as dance-

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and dining-room. The eating part ran, verandah-fashion, along the front and one side. A family from the silver mining town of Mount Isa ran the catering, and several girls made a working holiday of it by serving at the long trestle tables and washing up. The dining-room was run on a non-stop system—no one was ever refused a meal day or night, and hungry people could wander into the kitchen at any time and cook themselves a sizzling great steak smothered in onions and garnished with a collar of two or three eggs. Mealtimes were always a riot of fun and noise. There were no organised sittings: everyone spread themselves along the sixty-foot-long trestle tables, sitting on the long wooden benches. It was a wonderful opportunity for getting to know each another.

Four of the five days were given over to racing, the last race of each day being ridden by aborigine jockeys, who chose a native judge. Urged on by their screaming friends and families, all decked out in yellow and green satin rodeo shirts, and crowded on to every vehicle that could act as a grandstand, the jockeys rode like demons. On the last day there was a rip-roaring Rodeo, and a formal Ball in the evening to close the meeting. Our enclosure was like an Eastern bazaar as the girls prepared their dresses. Silks and satins were spread everywhere, on posts and guy ropes, on the portable tables pulled out from the tents. It was a marvellous bustle, with girls desperately wielding petrol irons to subdue yards of billowing net and tulle. This was the most important date in the year for some of them. It might be her last night with "him" for another year. Would he propose or in his shyness dedicate them both to another year of loneliness?

The Ball went on all night. Charles and I snatched a few disturbed hours of sleep, to be suddenly awakened by the pounding of hammers and the swish of canvas, as tents collapsed around us with precision and speed. Great trucks drove into the enclosure for loading, and in no time, dangerously top-heavy, lurched out again. Aborigines perched wherever they could find a hold; on canvas bundles, coils of rope, even firmly hanging on to each other. We heard shouted farewells all around us, the high-pitched "yak-ai's" of the abos mixing with the last-minute messages called out by the departing drivers. "Don't forget to send a bit of wedding cake, Mary!" or "Hey, Bob, tell that abo yard boy of yours to keep away from our cook!"



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Truck after truck pulled out in an enveloping blanket of dust. Charles and I were kept busy dashing from one car to the other saying good-bye to old and new friends—some of them Charles had known since he was a lad jackerooing on one of the far-away stations. One or two were cousins. I felt more than ever how much he belonged here; his roots had sunk very deep into this good earth. His very walk was freer here in the outback.

As the dust settled again after the last vehicle had driven away, we wandered back to the lonely little camp and stood disconsolately in the empty enclosure which a few hours ago had echoed with music and laughter. The community hall looked big and deserted. As we went to pick up the provisions the generous folk from the catering department had left us: fresh beef, potatoes, butter and bread—more than we could use in weeks—I had an idea. We were staying in camp for an extra day in order to clean up before pulling out again on to the trail, so why not use the empty lean-to by the hall?

We fetched four big iron tubs and filled them with soft rain-water from the tanks. It was heaven to plunge your arms into foaming soap-suds after making do with a small tin basin of muddy creek water. I thought how funny we must have looked, the four of us, all in a row, as we tossed great yellow chunks of home-made soap to each other and did our washing. But there was no one to share the joke, only the crows circling above us, on the lookout for food. And their dreary cawing could hardly be construed as laughter! It was good to work, it cured us of the flat feeling of aftermath and defeated the silence of the plains. By the end of the day everything we possessed had been through the tubs, and we crawled back to our camp with aching backs, but carrying kitbags filled with sun-bleached, clean-smelling clothes.

As dusk came the men went off to shower, and I tossed four big juicy steaks above the coals. I felt strangely alone, the darkness crept in on me from all sides, and the stark, dismantled camp area had the eerie look of a theatre when the stage is empty and the audience gone home. A guttural murmur from the shadows reached me. I felt my skin crinkle in fear. Then I swung round to see what it was, telling myself it was only a nightbird. Darker than the darkness, scarcely outlined at all, stood two figures, a strange aborigine and his woman. Speechless, I felt my knees caving in. Then the man stepped close to the fire and as

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he took on a more human shape I straightened up and rescued the steaks. He explained in pidgin English that he and his lubra had been "outbush" when their truckload of natives pulled out, and they had been left behind. In my relief I fed them, and later on gave them a couple of old blankets to curl up in by the fire. Next day, I told them, we would make a detour to leave them at their home station, Brunette Downs, which was only twelve miles away.

Early next morning we were on our way, our preparations watched by our unbidden guests in bewilderment. Why must the white man always be in such a "hurry-up" state?

My last job was to dampen the fire by throwing the remains of the tea on to it. This little ritual is like taking a last look at one's house before leaving it for a period. Out in the bush, the camp-fire *is*, however briefly, your home, and our five days at the Picnic Races had given us a certain sense of belonging to this curious windswept place. Once again, it would be left to the winds and the birds—until next year when, like an enchanted castle, it would once again be awakened from its sleep and play its part, with cheers and laughter and the drumming of hooves, in the lives of the men and women of the outback.

We had a tight schedule ahead of us. First of all the Katherine River, then all speed for Darwin, where the Admiral's barge was waiting to take us up the Adelaide river to the buffalo country of Marrakai.

Our vehicles ran sweetly on the tarmac road after the hard, rutted soil of the Barkly Tableland, and it was sweeter still to reach the Katherine river, with its great trees and rippling cascades and the song of many birds. We were kept awake that night by the noise of the water, so used had we become to the silence of the plains. This was the first running river since we had left the Darling two thousand miles away.

We enjoyed swimming and fishing but we could not stay long. A telegram at the little post office confirmed the time of sailing from Darwin—on Wednesday—and tides wait for no man.

After a hard drive through the old gold-lands of the Pine Creek area, stark and desolate, we pulled into Darwin on Tuesday night and went straight to the Darwin hotel. We had taken the precaution of booking a room, as it is always full of travellers from all parts of the world. In the morning we went down to see the Admiral's barge.





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What a horror of a thing it was! About twenty-five feet by fourteen, it was a derelict from the old days; an ex-police-cutter, no doubt. Now, shorn of its brass railings, it had been pressed into service as a crocodile-hunters' barge. For years it had nosed up all the slimy rivers from the Gulf of Joseph Buonaparte to the Gulf of Van Diemen. But for all its queer looks, it was a working boat, it knew its job, and in no time we'd loaded our gear aboard: camera, sound equipment, lights and batteries, foodstuffs and ammunition. Once we were on board we would be out in the buffalo lands for three months. It was August; and little sign now of winter as far north as we were.

I felt even more confident when I met the skipper. A short burly man, brown as an Aranda aborigine, he looked as if he could take any boat anywhere.

As he grinned at us, his left cheek rippled—a great scar ran down his face. Later on he told me he had got it from a Turkish bayonet in the battle of Gaza.

"Me and my mate Christian will do all we can to make you comfortable, Mrs. Chauvel. She's not a bloomin' floatin' palace, but she'll do. Swing 'er over, Mr. Christian!"

We were off. The cliffs of Darwin moved away.

### *The Crocodile Hunt*

WE chugged out from Port Darwin into Clarence Strait—that stretch of water between the Timor Sea and Van Diemen Gulf. It was cruelly hot, and there was no escape—the small cabin could never hold six of us at the same time, so Elsa and I sat on the cabin roof and looked back at the perfect panorama of the town as it opened out along the strangely coloured cliffs.

By the chaffing interchange between our skipper and his mate in the wheelhouse we realised that dubbing themselves Cap'n Bligh and Mr. Christian was a private joke between them. The former pointed out where the American battleship *Peary* had gone down when the Japs attacked and bombed Darwin.

We chugged across Shoal Bay, turned Gun Point and headed for the mangroved Vernon Islands. Away in the distance bush fires showed us Melville Island. Here, in the 1820s, English soldiers and Marines were unloaded to form a settlement and build forts, a heart-breaking task in the heat on that swampy, pestilential land. They sent a leaky ship called the *Lady Nelson* to the island of Timor for maize, pigs, rice and—terribly important—water-buffalo already broken to the yoke. Of a dozen buffaloes only three lived. But a contract was made with a French trader in Timor to supply water-buffalo to the settlements in North Australia. That is how the buffalo came to our country.

All that is left of the first ill-conceived settlements in the jungles and crocodile-infested waterways of Melville Island and the Cobourg Peninsula of Arnhem Land are the graves of those first settlers and their wives, who died from hunger and scurvy and fever. Their monument is a living one: the buffalo. These beasts lived on and multiplied and overran Melville, they spread from the Cobourg peninsula to the flood plains. They roamed in their thousands and

## *The Crocodile Hunt*

brought adventure to a low mosquito-ridden area of great rivers and swamps, larger than Belgium.

The first men to hunt the buffalo for its meat and hide were a sailor and a blacksmith. Then came the white-bearded Robinson Crusoe, so-called partly because of his name, partly because of his resource. He lived with the aborigines and half-castes and became a sort of chief. The next famous hunter came on horseback—Paddy Cahill. Buffalo-hunting had become big business, and Vestys of England leased a large slice of the buffalo lands called Marrakai. This is where we were bound for.

At last we reached Adams Bay, with its secret opening to the wide Adelaide river. Harry called us to the land side, pointing.

"A porpoise!" Elsa said.

But Cap'n Bligh raised his binoculars as the creature we had seen leapt out of the water again.

"No, by God!" he cried, "It's a croc!"

When it surfaced again we saw its great jaws snapping. It was a large man-eating crocodile.

"But where from?" I asked, "This is still the sea."

"Oh, from New Guinea. Or from Melville Island, it's lousy with the beasties. It's probably heading for the Adelaide, like us. If he'd surface we could follow him in—it'll be a hard job in the dark."

"But they'd have to swim three hundred miles from New Guinea," said Elsa.

"Only a hundred from Papua to Cape York," returned Cap'n Bligh. "The tip of the continent gets its croc supplies from up there. They work their way along over the years—we're never rid of 'em, even after a big shoot."

As darkness fell we spent two long hours groping for the opening to the Adelaide River and Christian watched his engine like a cat watching a mouse—one false move backward or forward could smash us on the rocks. Cap'n Bligh never left the bow, taking soundings with the plumb-line every three minutes and we helped by keeping a light on him. Then, suddenly, the mangroves fell away on both sides, the night opened around us. We were through, and the big river lay ahead. We anchored and slept for an hour, then took advantage of the current to travel upstream.

## *Walkabout*

At sunrise we were able to see the flat lands on either side. The river coils like a snake, wide and twisting. Its source was three hundred miles inland, in grim, dry mountains. Here it was jungle-fringed in parts, and beyond this fringe stretched the swamps. Bird life abounded. We were in the breeding grounds of the brown- and white-crested herons, egrets and Nah-Kin cranes and all kinds of water waders. Farther inland were thousands of wild geese and duck.

We spent some hours on land filming the bird sanctuaries, then pushed farther upstream, so that at night we could drift with the tide looking for crocodiles as the falling river bared the mudbanks.

When night came it was black and still. Our lights and cameras were ready. Bligh, stripped to the waist and greasy with sweat, gave Mr. Christian orders to put the boat before the wind, and cut the engine down. The jungle stood out starkly, an owl screeched, night birds flew high. It was a perfect night for crocodiles!

Then we shone our powerful searchlight on the mudbanks and picked out a white, worm-riddled piece of timber, and dropped anchor. Elsa helped Harry and Rod with the cameras and lights and I held the searchlight with one hand and the heavy .303 with the other. The idea was to bring the rifle in line with the searchlight when a crocodile had been spotted. Then shine it directly into the beast's two red eyes to dazzle it—then shoot. Bligh stood beside me with a long harpoon. The moment I fired, he would hurl it to grapple the body and prevent it from sinking to the bottom of the river.

It is a matter of patience, skill and endurance. It was an arm-breaking business, practising with both the searchlight and the rifle, and getting ready to whisper "now" to the harpoonist tensed beside me. About midnight we found at least six crocodiles half submerged on a mudbank. I foolishly moved the light about to find the biggest and succeeded in frightening all of them into the stream where they quickly disappeared. The camera crew, thinking I had signalled, switched on all the lights and cameras, eager to film the kill!

Ten minutes later I was luckier—and wiser. I spotted a lone monster floating in front of the barge, attracted by the gently chugging engine. I held the light on him, took aim, and fired. At once Bligh launched the harpoon, and it held the crocodile as it threshed the water in its death throes. I had hit it between the eyes and it could only have lived



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for seconds, but half the river mud seemed to be lashed up from the slimy bed and its terrible jaws snapped furiously. I had little compunction at ridding the river of such a monster.

It was no fun pulling the dead weight aboard. Later we found it had just eaten a young buffalo calf, and measured eleven feet.

We barely snatched two hours of sleep before dawn. It was dankly cold. As I opened my eyes wearily I saw the indefatigable Bligh, still naked to the waist, squatting on the side of the boat, both feet crossed and dangling over the river and holding between his toes the barrel of the .303 while he threaded a "pull through" down the breech. This was certainly a novel way to clean a rifle.

Dawn had come, the vampire bats flitted no longer, the owls were silent. Instead, little white cockatoos came in sweeping clouds down-river. Everywhere, perching on the trees above the water-line, were the brown and white herons, egrets and crows. The river was steamy, and the sun rose like a great ball of fire behind the eastern wilderness. It dispelled the clammy cold; once more it was really hot.

Bligh was anxious to skin our victim before the sun got at it. As he worked he pointed out some interesting features. The crocodile has no tongue. The air passages don't connect with its throat, instead they travel through the snout to the back of the head, sealed off by a valve. That is why it can pull its victim under water and still keep its jaws closed. The lungs fill with air, the valve closes and it can submerge with safety. Elsa was curious to know how the crocodile could see underwater, and Bligh explained. He took a sharp stick and gently probed one eye open. There were two very fine lids, and two filaments. These filaments adjusted the sight to the waters of a muddy billabong or the sudden glare of harsh sunlight. It is believed, he said, that the deeper down the crocodile goes, so a further filament adjusts the eyes to the changing light values. A fact that surprised us was that the crocodile's sight in the dark is equal to that of a cat or an owl.

After this I was more amazed than ever at our shooting it.

Bligh turned the beast over on to its back. The belly, he said, was the most prized part. Crocodile hunters receive about 8/6 an inch for this section. Christian then butted in with a fascinating item about its two sets of ribs; these grow longways and sideways, and can contract or expand to allow it to live under two different pressures.

## Walkabout

As the sun rose we threw the carcass overboard, and carefully pegged out the skin. Then we chugged upstream to meet our trucks on the vast buffalo plain behind Chinaman's Point, the white herons forming up by the banks, like a reception committee.

It had been a tough trip, especially for Elsa, although she had not complained. I had three days' growth of beard and felt like getting it off before we landed. As I shaved, Christian poked his face into mine. "Don't let Cap'n Bligh see you using that thing," he hissed, jerking his thumb at my small safety razor. "We use an axe here!"

We approached the east bank, where a million buffalo roamed. It was heaven to jump off the barge, stretch our legs and put the billy on. Bligh and Christian scanned the plains with binoculars.

"I've never seen them so dry this time of year," said Bligh.

Christian pointed to a hazy wall of paperbark trees balanced half on the horizon and half in the sky. We were now quite used to the distortion of all things by distance and heat.

"Dust away over there," he said.

Bligh glared at him. "Wait until you're spoken to, Mr. Christian. You're mistaken. It's some buffalo on the run."

Our vehicles showed up while we were drinking our tea, and transferring our gear from the old *Bounty*, as we all now called her, we took leave of our skipper and his mate—two of the finest fellows in the north.

The land was so flat that we could still see the barge as she rounded a bend in the river. Bligh waved with both hands over his head, Christian put his knitted cap on the end of the rifle and held it high. Then they passed out of sight, and we turned our attention to the flat plains ahead. It had been an eventful trip. What lay ahead promised to be even more exciting.

### *The Mighty Men of Marrakai*

WE were glad to pull away from our very first camp on the plains out from Chinaman's Point—even with the fires of buffalo dung we had still been badly bitten by mosquitoes and the sun was scorching us on an open plain.

We had rough maps to show the way to Marrakai, and were on the look out for buffalo. The first ones we saw emerged from chalky bogs of slime and raced away to the shelter of a pandanus scrub. Grey from the clay of the bog, they looked more like small elephants than buffaloes. The country of Marrakai from the north was the strangest piece of land we had been in. At this time of the year everything appeared bone dry, then suddenly a turn in the track would bring us face to face with a long billabong of muddy water, packed with whistling duck, or to swamps upon which whole fleets of great white pelicans swam. Then right from the very edge of the waters the country was cruelly dry again with all the trees and small bushes wilting.

Marrakai itself has no counterpart in Australia as a homestead, and I doubt whether anything like it would ever be found in other parts of the world. It stands on a stark dry hill with a bamboo creek cutting its way across the flats at the bottom. It is built almost wholly of galvanised iron because the termites and white ants of the area devour almost everything except iron and steel and certain of our toughest timbers. The walls and roof were painted with a strange mixture of greys and greens during World War II to camouflage it from the Japanese bombers. On either side of the main homestead there are the most amazing "sleep-outs", great open rooms roofed with the thick bark from the paperbark trees and at the rear is a bore and the eternal windmill and again the horrible green-grey tanks. This was the home of Roy Williams, the famous white buffalo hunter who managed the world's greatest buffalo station for Vesty's of England, and his

## *Walkabout*

wife who had made of this strange homestead one of the truly comfortable places at which to pause for a while in this parched land.

We had our first council of war under the mosquito nets in the Marrakai men's "sleep out", with Roy Maluka\* Williams taking the squatter's chair. We were to hold many councils of war from then on, planning the best methods to film buffaloes while not interfering with the work of the buffalo station, for Vesty's had asked for the hides of 8,000 bulls that season. This was to be the last shooting season as the Government was resuming the land.

I lay in a comfortable iron stretcher which swung on chains suspended from the crosspole of the roof. Clarrie Wilkinson was on the opposite side of the "sleep out"—Bill Harney was at one end and Phil Pike, who was to be responsible for much of the photographing on this first occasion of filming buffaloes, at the other. Harry Closter swung from his hammock in the middle, and other helpers were around about. The largest moon I think I have ever seen lit the whole plain of Marrakai. It had risen like a great orb from behind the sombre line of trees which marked Marrakai Creek, where aborigines crooned beside twinkling fires. The mighty shooters of Marrakai were all in camp at this time: Cobobulus, Darren, and others.

The flickering light from our kerosene lanterns was dimmed by the strong rays of the moon, but every time the Maluka drew deeply on his cigarette the conflagration outlined his powerful features in a strong Rembrandt treatment of light and shade. As usual his powerful chest stretched tight against the clean white singlet he always wore in the evenings.

"I'll take you and Elsa and Phil on the big blitz, and leave Cobobulus behind to guide your other blokes down to our camp on Alligator Head. They can set up your camp there near ours. What I want to do is give you a good "reecy" round the big plains while the wind is blowing hard from the east. That will keep our scent away from the buffaloes, so you should be able to see them out on the Mary Plain in their thousands without disturbing them. I can't afford to disturb them because I haven't shot there yet this season. Once they smell us or we start shooting they'll keep galloping and moving away until

\* Aborigine word for Boss.

## *The Mighty Men of Marrakai*

they've covered twenty miles or more." He threw his cigarette away and went on.

"You've got to get the feel of the country first, Charles, and know something about the buffaloes and our work before you'll thoroughly understand my plans to set up your photography programme to fit in with my station work."

"Can't we follow the buffaloes into the paperbark swamps?—that's what I'd like to do."

"Oh, yes!" he replied. "We often belt them out of the small scrubs with gunfire. It's the only thing they understand, but it's useless trying to follow them into the big scrubs. You can only go through the small scrubs on horseback and then only if you know them, because they're swamps as well. They're death traps of bog and fallen timber. But we'll cover a world of trouble in the big blitz waggon tomorrow. We've a big day ahead, so you'd better get all the sleep you can."

Some hours later Roy Williams shouted "all about" to his blacks down on the flat. The curlews stopped crying and dawn broke through soft pink clouds from behind Marrakai Creek, just as the moon had done.

A cold breeze swept the plains. In the centre square of the Sydney Williams' hut we huddled about Mrs. Williams' breakfast table. We ate great plates of bullock fry and mashed potatoes and boiled onions. Never was there such a breakfast.

Elsa and Phil and I were slung back on ropes in the back of a truck. We copped the lot, as an Aussie says—twigs, leaves, green ants, poisonous caterpillars, dust and bruises.

At forty miles an hour we attacked one pandanus thicket after another, looking for buffaloes to chase, not to shoot. It was the Maluka's idea, to get us used to the sway of the truck—to sharpen our wits and perception—to get us used to gaining and holding balance—to lying back on the ropes slung from the back of his cabin from which we'd shoot with our cameras. He was putting us to school before our serious filming started.

As we were in the open portion of the truck, we had to watch the trees, particularly as the branches came from nowhere like lightning flashes to sweep down and across at us. Whoever saw a branch coming would call "Duck!". Then we'd stay ducked until a rap inside the

## *Walkabout*

cabin from the Maluka or a call of "all clear!" from one of us who could spot the way ahead.

We attacked the open forest country. The blitz was fitted with a "cow catcher" made from spare steel rails from the Darwin-Birdum railway, a hundred miles away. When buffaloes were spotted, the call "Buffaloes! Buffaloes!" came from the Maluka and his abos.

The abo shooters with their rifles, made foothold or toe-hold anywhere possible. Sometimes, like swinging chimpanzees, they'd seemingly fall from the sides of the truck to avoid a tree, only to re-appear again, still aboard, with their rifles. Roy, the Maluka, swung the great waggon round trees and mammoth ant-hills, sometimes just on two wheels. He shouted up at us: "If you find you're being tossed just 'fasten' to something."

Not knowing Roy very well at this stage we thought he was being funny. But we soon learned to "fasten" to things.

We spotted a small family group of buffalo. They were watching us from the heavy shadows beneath interlacing pandanus palms. This was meat to the Maluka. "Get your cameras on to these," he called up to us. Then every pandanus tree on Marrakai seemed to hit us at once. We had been taken off guard as we looked to our cameras, making quick adjustments and trying to gain balance with the ropes. A huge frond swept Elsa's ten gallon hat away. I caught a smarting blow across the face, and we both dropped down behind the cabin with dry pandanus smothering us.

We heard the Maluka above the roar of the blitz engine and the smash and crash of trees. "Fasten on up there!" Crash! The buffalo plain seemed to leave us, and then just as suddenly come up to meet us, all in one split second. Of course we hadn't fastened on. Clutching our cameras we had been thrown from our feet into a tangled wreckage on the iron floor of the waggon. We struggled to fasten to something. Phil Pike had fallen right across me and all I could find to fasten to was Phil's leg. Elsa also had made a football tackle and was holding fast to Phil's other leg. Phil was lying on his back—one arm round his camera, and with his one free hand he still held the rope.

It was impossible to stand up while the great waggon turned left and right over on two wheels and brought more branches down. The grinning face of nuggetty little Darren showed up miraculously through

## *The Mighty Men of Marrakai*

a shower of rubbish. He eased out the big rope for us to grasp and we all pulled ourselves quickly to our feet again. We only had one buffalo in front of our camera sights now—the bull. We were lumbering right on his tail and we had just enough time to crank a few feet of film through the camera, before we hit a great swathe of high turkey bush, which quickly swallowed the charging bull and then our waggon.

Then we ran blind in the turkey bush, still at about forty miles an hour. I saw something coming so I laced my arm quickly in Elsa's and shouted "Hang on!" We hit the mighty termite bed right on its side. The whole top crumbled and what was left of it lifted our waggon high in the air. But nothing stopped our gallant Maluka and his team of grinning abos.

Phil, thinking only to protect his camera, had crashed on to his back again with both arms locked about the steel camera. He struggled up and held on to us.

Then we suddenly began to enjoy the ride. We began to laugh—mostly at the antics of the abo shooters dodging trees and branches which swept the sides of the waggon. The bull had gained on us and his heels were kicking up dry dust and clods of hard earth as he headed into another scrub. With a roar we followed. Mick had his rifle up but the Maluka held to his arrangement with us not to shoot. A bloodwood tree split clean in two as our steel rail track and the cow-catcher caught it square on. We were down behind the cabin again. Then the waggon stopped dead without a second's warning. The back of the iron cabin came to meet us and we'd have split our heads open if it hadn't been for the large spare tyre and a sackful of saddles and hobbles.

The Maluka had driven hard for an opening between two really large trees, with a solid six-foot termite bed standing between. He thought better of it and made what the abos call a "dead finish" stop!

Elsa was bruised and smarting from green-ant stings, but still undaunted. I didn't realise that I had cut my hand until I saw the blood spurting. Phil had hit his head rather badly when he fell to the floor the second time, and a big bump had risen above his right eye.

"Have you learned to fasten on up there?"

"Yes, we've fastened!" I shouted back.

## *Walkabout*

The three abo shooters were bending themselves double with laughter and jabbering away excitedly.

"All aboard, Mickie, Darren and Charcoal!" shouted the Maluka. "We'll get out of here and have a look at Bulla Baba water-hole."

Bulla Baba water-hole was another Australian contradiction. We travelled for a further mile through hungry-looking scrub country where everything living was brown, and the ground between the trees had no grass but only strange clumps and shoots of sallow green-wood plants. Whitish termite beds shared the country with these strange trees, some of which were entombed where the termites had built around them. A monster parenthi lizard like a small crocodile stood stock-still to watch us; then turning, ran from us like a streak of lightning, leaving a cloud of white dust.

If ever there was a desolate spot it was this, and then at that very second the contradiction came. The brown trees and the dry earth made way for a beautiful lagoon. Between us and the lagoon was the greenest grass we had seen in months, lawns of green from which a big flock of blue-grey native companions rose, and piped around the groups of buffalo as they wallowed in the water and grazed peacefully on its fringes.

The Maluka galloped the blitz and ourselves madly around the lagoon. We had so surprised the buffaloes that they turned to see what the fuss was all about. Some faced us until we were right amongst them and our cameras captured tossing heads and horns. Then Maluka Williams stopped the truck and we were able to set up our cameras quickly for stationary shots.

Most of the buffaloes galloped for the dry scrubland we had just left, but some family groups turned to watch us curiously and then came quietly towards us.

By keeping quite still we were able to get some good close-ups of big heads and these shots afterwards proved to be some of the best we had secured.

One little buffalo calf with such big ears that it looked like an elephant, was so trusting as to come within a few paces of our cameras. Like most children he trusted everything about him, but his mother was not to know that we would never harm her child. Each year she had learned to fear humans more. The Maluka told us that if we had been



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on horseback, not one buffalo would have remained. They know that a human on horseback means death, and a cow buffalo is not to know that only the full-grown bulls are shot. Each shooting season from the time that she was a three-months'-old calf, like the little fellow who stood sniffing the air in front of our cameras, that cow buffalo had seen the men of Marrakai appear suddenly on horseback. Terrified, she had joined in the stampede to reach the scrubs or paperbark swamps. She had heard the rifle fire, sometimes so close as to deafen her; she had felt her mate fall in his tracks beside her, and heard his sharp agonised groan. In deep despair she had reached the safety of the scrubs with other buffalo cows and calves. Then the cry of the carrions as hundreds of hawks swooped over the plain to rip and fight for the flesh of twenty buffalo bulls.

Although there were no horses about and no sounds of the deadly rifle shots—but only strange wheeled objects, and humans moving about in a strange way--this buffalo cow would take no chances. She swung quickly and galloped for the scrub. The little fellow, quick to sense his mother's turn, never gave us another thought.

We turned our attention to the beautiful round swamp called Bulla Baba. It was an oasis, set in that brown, horribly dry scrubby country. The trees that fringed the dry scrub and faced the lagoon looked very green and tall. Termite beds of blue and white were dotted about the lawns. A number of dried buffalo skeletons, one still with parchment tags of skin, lay almost smothered by the rank grasses. Cockatoos screeched overhead—forming a cloud of white they circled the lagoon and then settled about the top of a tall Lancewood tree.

A sudden whirlwind swirled out of the scrub, a spiral of dry dust and leaves about thirty feet in height. It lost its dusty shape and form as it swept across the green grass and over the placid waters of the lagoon blurring its clarity.

"How far would those buffaloes run?" we asked the Maluka.

"Not far," he replied. "You see, it's their water. They'll come here at the beginning of the season and stay right on through all the shooting, right into the wet. Then they'll go back into the scrubs on the higher ground, not far in from here, and breed, and come back with their new calves to Bulla Baba. You see, this is their water-hole—not even our shooting will drive them from it."

## *Walkabout*

He continued: "Even when there's a drought and their water-holes dry up, the little families that belong here will stay on and die. I've seen the pelicans do the same thing."

We little knew then that we were to witness this tragedy at Bulla Baba at the very end of this "dry".

Elsa seemed to want to move away from Bulla Baba. As she turned back to the waggon she asked whether there would be shooting at the lagoon this season.

"Yes," he replied; "we'll be shooting here later. I noticed four good bulls: We clean up the lagoons in the scrub after we've finished shooting on the big Mary River plains. There are two other small lagoons on from here—Malgen and Gundu. We'll pass them on our way to Alligator Head this afternoon."

"Do you ever shoot other buffaloes than bulls?"

"Not if we can help it. Sometimes a mistake is made and there has been trouble with other buffalo shooters who break the law. We sometimes find buffalo calves that have lost their mothers straying over into our country; which shows the cows have been shot."

We boiled the billy at Bulla Baba and for a long time sat in silence. The Maluka was as busy as usual, moving about the lagoon and studying tracks that led from it—all the time whistling over and over again his one bar from "The Wearin' o' the Green".

The thought of the little families of buffaloes that lived and died by their lagoons had upset Elsa and we couldn't help thinking of all that slaughter on the flood plains. So much of the life out here was without heart—or so it seemed to us. As if he knew our feelings, the Maluka came and helped himself to a sandwich and ate it and drank his pannikin of tea without milk, still standing up. He swept a wide half-circle with his hand.

"All this is useless country—good for nothing except buffaloes, and later on perhaps to grow rice," he said. "If we didn't shoot buffaloes it wouldn't be worth two bob to anyone, and if we didn't shoot buffaloes for just two years they would overcrowd the plains and perish from starvation. There's thirty thousand of them, perhaps more, and it's a terrible sight to see them dying by inches in their hundreds during a bad drought."

We blazed our way through another twenty miles of famished-

## *The Mighty Men of Marrakai*

looking forests and ugly ant beds—scurried a few family groups of buffalo—visited the other two pretty lagoons, Gundu and Mulgen, and late in the afternoon came suddenly upon a great paperbark lagoon which fringed the Mary River Plain. This was a marvellous sight—a great paperbark swamp leading into a flood plain of green grasses, red and blue lilies, snow-white birds and lumbering buffaloes. Columns of tall trees stood reflected in the water. It was hard to believe it would soon all turn to mud.

Long trails of flowing paper-like bark swing from the immense tree trunks and festoons of vivid green leaves sway in long garlands from the tree tops. Whole platoons of white and blue cranes were swimming about on the pools and a family of fat bustards was striding along the waterfront. The sun was setting to the west and its cross lighting brought rainbow tints to fall across the long purpling corridors of trees. The buffaloes went on quietly feeding on water-weeds. The Maluka said the wind was blowing from them to us and being short-sighted, they could neither see nor smell us.

As we emerged from the paperbark swamp he pointed.

"There she is—the greatest plain of all." And before us lay the wide landscape of the Mary River plain. As far as we could see, the vast plain was snow-white with birds—mostly white cranes and egrets and great white pelicans. A family of buffaloes slushed their way through a water channel in the foreground, and white egrets rode on their backs.

We left our vehicles and took up positions with our cameras behind the tall termite beds, and filmed the first long shots of the flood plains.

A wild pig with its litter of porkers suddenly awakened from a heavy sleep, just as Phil moved round a tall ant bed. The old sow tripped him up as it sprang from its dusty burrow, still half asleep and with its squealing litter hurried away into the dry scrubland.

Flocks of geese were striding about quite unconcernedly a few yards ahead. They rose from the ground when the pig squealed, only to come down to feed a little farther on.

With our backs to an exhausted land we stood and viewed a land of plenty. Wild geese and duck, wild fat turkeys, and pigs—and out in the billabongs on the plain, the juicy barramundi fish.

A long grey blue wisp of smoke twisting up from the promontory

### *Walkabout*

called Alligator Head, showed where our camp had been pitched. It was getting late. We'd call it a day.

The next few weeks were the most adventurous ones of our lives, as we went out every day with the buffalo hunters. They were exciting days, of charging, crashing buffalo herds coming hard at our cameras. Sometimes we would be on foot and at other times in a jeep, travelling at a tremendous speed across the rough bogs, in and out of buffalo wallows, swirling through clouds of thin dust and smashing through pandanus or bamboo.

There were times when the camps had to be moved to new positions. Then we would motor the hundred miles to Darwin to heal our battle scars and repair vehicles, or fly across to Arnhem Land—but always we came back to the flood plains to film the hunting of the buffalo.

We advanced deeply into summer and witnessed the first moves to close Marrakai homestead, following the surrender of its lease. The first load of furniture moved out as we took our leave of Roy and Dorothy Williams, and all the mighty men of Marrakai. Where would all the great shooters go? Perhaps to the lands to which we were to travel in our search for a strange buffalo shooters' camp on the plains below Arnhem Land.





### *The Buffalo Camp*

"I HAVEN'T a clue as to what the place will be like," Charles warned me, "I've only heard that there's a lone, white buffalo hunter there and a retinue of aborigines."

Charles had planned to make some changes in our schedule to allow us to visit this camp, on the flood plains out from Arnhem Land. So I was rather intrigued when we finally ploughed our way through pandanus scrub and over bull-dust tracks to the outpost buffalo camp.

On the fringe of the stark buffalo plains and on a wide disc of dust about half an acre in circumference, sprawled a collection of shanties—about six in all, most of them barely tall enough for the average man to stand up in. They were made of odd pieces of corrugated iron, rusty and riddled with gaping holes, and all dejectedly leaning awry. In front of the "boss hunter's" abode, a pandanus tree stood, nakedly stripped of its fronds. It was there, not to beautify, but as a hanger—a type of primitive wardrobe from which hung on its few remaining branches, cartridge belts and sugar bags of supplies.

Gaunt and sullen dogs panted the hot hours away as they cringed against whatever shade the roasting corrugated walls of the shanties could offer. An assortment of aborigine women moved through the camps. Some were salting and turning the great grey buffalo hides while others just mooched about, puffing at long pipes in the scant shade of the trees. Naked piccaninnies listlessly prodded the dogs, hoping to stir them up to a little play—some being satisfied to curl up with the dogs and sleep it out with them. Most of the native hunters boasted only a cyclone stretcher, which sprawled starkly out in the blazing sun, a tumbled mass of dusty grey military blankets their only adornment.

The "boss hunter", the only white man permanently there, slept in a shed. In front of the shack stood his stretcher, the whole surrounded by a

## *Walkabout*

four-foot wall of strong wire mesh to keep the wild pigs out. When we paid a social call on our host we would sit behind this wall, all perched along the cyclone stretcher and sipping strong black tea. So strong that, to put it in bushman terms, "you could stand the spoon up in it". If you liked your tea sickly sweet, there was always a tin of condensed milk handy. The kitchen was outside, with a corrugated roof. It was open all round and also surrounded by wire mesh. The stove was an open fire on the ground with two large iron bars across, to hold the cooking pots and a few crudely made benches circled the fireplace, for cutting up meat.

A giant leichardt tree spanned the centre of the rectangle. The leichardt is rather like the Moreton Bay fig tree, and with the same exposed and sprawling roots. The trucks were usually parked under its shade and hessian sacks of meat hung there. No meat was left exposed because of the swarms of flies.

For privacy, we made our camp in the abandoned and rusted ruins of an outpost two miles away. One lone shed stood on the plain beside a beautiful half-moon lagoon called Soda Creek. There was good rain water in the rusted tank and cement floors to camp on. Beside us a broken and rusted windmill pumped ceaselessly and without avail. From here we visited the buffalo camp daily. Sometimes to get help for our filming, and at other times to collect some buffalo meat, which was always a welcome change from tinned meats, particularly if first stewed, then curried. During our visits Charles would squat on the ground with the boss, who would outline on the ground the country we were in. We called this "making mud maps". It is the bushman's only way of giving you your bearings.

While they were engaged with their mud maps, I would laugh an hour away with Cleopatra. Cleopatra was a large white cockatoo, and the pet of the camp. Charles named her Cleopatra because she had such a regal waddle. She had a regal taste, too, refusing to walk anywhere, and using the backs of the dogs as a permanent taxi service. It was amusing to watch her riding perched on the back of one of the dogs, like a circus rider. When the dog started to trot in the wrong direction for her, she would take off and land gracefully upon the back of another who happened to be going her way. The dogs tolerated her exploitation of them with a sort of lazy resignation.



## *The Buffalo Camp*

If the dogs were resting in the shade and Cleopatra wanted some action, she would prance around them, pecking at their ears and at times clawing her way up on to their backs. One day I saw her land on one of the wild pigs. He took it very badly, but Cleo hung on, her comb fluffed in defiance.

She even held tight to a dog's back as it raced to meet the native shooters as they rode into camp headed by the famous Chinese buffalo shooter called "Yellow Charlie". Behind Yellow Charlie came a fine aborigine, as tall and as straight as a tree, whom we called "The Arab". Then there was Charcoal, Toba, and Daylight and others. After meeting them all we made our way back to our home at Soda Creek.

The mosquitoes were bad in that country. At "sun sit down" we could both see and hear them coming. They came like a thick grey veil of stinging menace, and heaven help you if you were not under your net or well protected. Harry made a sound-track of them which, when played back, sounded like an aeroplane blitz.

Although I don't usually wear slacks, at "sun sit down" on the buffalo plains, I borrowed a pair of Charles'. These I coupled with thick woollen socks pulled up bicycle fashion over the legs of the slacks, and two long-sleeved shirts, one not being sufficient protection against the penetration of the stings. I topped this devastating outfit with my large western felt hat, around and over which I draped a voluminous piece of white mosquito net. My appearance in this outfit never failed to send Charles and the team into guffaws of laughter. Charles always referred to it as my formals, because I always wore it for our evening meal—lifting the mosquito-net veil of my hat furtively to swiftly convey a few mouthfuls of food under it.

The natives suggested that we should collect supplies of buffalo dung from the plain, and place it in little mounds around our camp. At sundown we were to light these mounds, and the smoke would help to keep the mosquitoes at bay. We adopted this scheme, which did help a little, but the pungent fumes made our eyes red and inflamed. Also it was not the most appetising atmosphere in which to cook a dinner.

Of all our locations, this particular one had more difficulties for me, from a feminine, as well as a domestic viewpoint. There was always

## *Walkabout*

the major difficulty of that little last-minute stroll into the darkness before turning in for the night. The open plain, which, when flooded with moonlight, offered no privacy. The dense scrub was the next alternative, and the scrub was the place where the buffaloes roamed at night. However, the scrub it had to be—and every crackle of the undergrowth sent cold shivers down my spine,

The early mornings were always the nicest time of the day, when for a brief hour before the blazing sun took over, we would steal out with our cameras to spy upon the wonderland of bird life on the lagoons and swamps. Sometimes hundreds of white heron faced each other across a waterway, like a collection of company directors around an outsized board-room table—the white herons all reflected in the water against a mirror of azure blue. If we were lucky the stately brolga birds might strut through the colonies of burdekin duck, white cockatoos, wild geese and pelicans. I hoped one morning we might be lucky enough to see a group of brolgas performing one of their remarkable ballets, for they were noted for their dances. These regal birds are about five feet tall, grey in colour and pencil-slim. When seen in a group at play, or dancing, they are really quite breathtaking.

On our last morning at Soda Creek, when I had almost given up hope, my wish was granted. Charles and I were working our way quietly through a dense paperbark swamp, up to our knees in mud and slime, when suddenly, there they were. Seven stately brolgas. They were in a complete circle and frisking about first on the ground and then in the air. They had as a plaything some piece of white substance which could have been paper, but was possibly white leaves or paperbark.

Their lovely wings were wide-spread and flapping in unison, as their slim long legs pranced excitedly. One bird would pick up the white plaything, tossing it into the air and executing a few jumping steps. It was no sooner on the ground than a second bird would pick it up in its beak and toss it higher—springing high off the ground in its effort.

I don't know if my imagination was playing tricks, but each time one of the brolgas did a particularly high toss the others seemed to flap their wings with greater gusto, as if in applause. We could have watched for hours, but unfortunately an odd squeal in the mangroves

## *The Buffalo Camp*

startled me and made me fall back against a tree. At once, the birds rose and went soaring away into the sky.

Charles and Harry and I had planned to take light swags and our cameras and head out deep into the swamp lands in search of some walkabout natives the Boss hunter had told us about. There were three families out hunting; perhaps we could join one of them before the swamps dried up. The summer was savage now.

We paid our last call to the buffalo camp to get final directions and some fresh buffalo meat; also to say good-bye to those rugged but generous people. Yellow Charlie, perhaps the wildest rider of them all, had donned his best bright blue shirt, his smiling yellow-brown face shining with cleanliness. The Boss buffalo hunter sat nonchalantly rolling a cigarette and licking the end, lest we should suspect that he minded our going. The lubras clustered round to wish us good-bye. The piccaninnies turned head over heels in the dust when given their bags of candy. The dogs barked madly to add to the din—and Cleopatra landed right on top of my head. The whole camp laughed.

The sun was high before we finally turned our backs on the rusted outpost of Soda Creek.

### *Walkabout*

**W**<sup>E</sup> walked out into the swamp lands, lightly clad and lightly burdened—with just a roll of canvas each—mosquito nets—a rifle which we might be forced to live by unless we could tag along with some aborigines—our billy cans and knapsacks with flour, tea and sugar.

The wild, wide world was ours for the taking, although I feared the days ahead with the heat and mosquitoes. The land was wilfully beautiful with its lily lagoons and exotic plants that contained poisons—the seeping heat that gave abundant life to the trees and plants which had their feet in water—the lily pools on the plains and the scrubs that held the crocodiles and the death-dealing taipans (deadly snakes).

Rod had taken ill and had left the country after our voyage up the river and Ian now took over the vigil and lone command of our headquarters at Soda Creek, and Harry scouted ahead with us. We entered a wide, dry river bed with dense clumps of inter-twining bamboos forming patterns of fine traceries against the china-blue sky.

Eighty years ago large numbers of Chinese coolies had worked in the Territory, on the construction of our overland telegraph line. They had planted the bamboo which later had choked the upper reaches of all these rivers and creeks, sucking from the already dry country the last of its moisture—and leaving only dust. We paused for a while in the centre of this dense forest, to listen to the eerie sighing of the bamboo. It gave a long-drawn out sigh, then as some of the large pieces rubbed together, they sounded as if they were deeply groaning.

I could well imagine some poor soul camping alone at night in this strange forest, really losing his nerve if he listened too long to the dirge of the whispering bamboo. It was a relief to climb the steep bank on the opposite side of the river bed and to meet the welcoming blaze of the clear blue sky.

## *Walkabout*

Not many miles farther on, we entered the kingdom of the termites. Miles of ant beds—the skyscrapers of the ant world. Some were twenty feet high, all leaning to the magnetic north, and built tall to catch the prevailing winds for coolness, also to raise themselves above the annual flooding of the country. These castles are built by small squashy white ants, which are slow-moving and sightless. Because they hate the light, they first have to build tunnels to travel to work in. We trudged in and out of the oddly shaped termite beds, some of them as grotesque and fantastic as modern sculptures—others resembling statues of the Madonna and child, or of hooded women carrying wood. From a distance the ant beds looked like a rather stark futuristic cemetery.

As we came to a small clearing, Charles pointed excitedly ahead, and for a moment I could not make out what he had seen. Then I realised what had so amazed him. A primitive native, standing absolutely still not twenty yards from the bonnet of the car. Except for a few pieces of string, he was completely naked. He stood balanced on one leg, the other tucked-up foot resting on the knee of the leg he was standing on. It was the attitude adopted by our long-legged brolga bird. The aborigine can stand like this, immovable, for long periods of time. The native carried a spear, and continued to stare in our direction without moving a muscle—like an ebony statue. We called to him. For a while he seemed unaware of us. Suddenly the tiny black top of a piccaninny's head peered furtively from behind a tall ant bed—and as quickly disappeared again. Then a handsome lubra ventured a peep, and disappeared again as quickly as the piccaninny.

When Charles held out a plug of dark tobacco to the native, a glimmer of awareness crossed the ebony face. He understood tobacco—they always do. Slowly the propped leg relaxed and fell, and he moved proudly towards us. There was no quick snatching of the tobacco. With a slight, lordly, bend of the head he accepted it, as if conferring the favour upon us.

"Moora," we said in greeting—using an Aranda word. He greeted us in a different tongue. We did not know much of his language, but found he had worked on one of the buffalo stations, so spoke a little pidgin English. He told us that he was on his yearly "walkabout" time with his family.

## *Walkabout*

Most stations encourage this walkabout period. It gives the native a change of surroundings—and also gives him an opportunity to attend distant tribal get-togethers. Most important of all, it helps keep his hand in at hunting and living in true native fashion. Otherwise, his art of living off the land would in time be completely lost to him. What we have seen of the really true and primitive aborigine leads us to believe that he has a most profound knowledge of bush diet, and his genius for finding food under the most stark and desolate conditions would put our resources to shame.

In contrast to many other native races who spend most of their lives bent under heavy yokes, or strapped to the handles of wooden ploughs as the bullocks pull them through the long hot days, or up to their knees in the mud and slush of the steamy rice fields, our Australian aborigine strides through his bush a free man. He lives on the wide country which provides him, not only with just one staple dish such as a bowl of rice, but with a hundred changing varieties of animal and vegetable foods. His understanding of the seasons over the wide game reserves gives him a constant change of diet. Because he has to hunt vigorously for his food, he gains all the essential exercise needed for every muscle of his body. As we talked with our native friend, we found his name sounded something like Mickie Gul-Gul—so we called him Gul-Gul.

Quietly and shyly his lubra came from behind the ant bed, still cautiously keeping her distance. She carried one piccannini boy whom afterwards we found they called Nipper, and was followed by two little girls: Mariwan, about eight years old, and Nardoo, a three-year-old who clutched her leg so fiercely she could barely move. She was the cutest chocolate doll I had ever seen. I nicknamed her "Piccannini Doll", a name that always sent her into fits of wild giggling, shy twists and turns, and much doubling up round the tree trunk. Their mother's name was Malbibbi, and she was as handsome as her name.

Charles and I had always longed to go on a native walkabout, to see how they managed to live off the land and camp without all the gear we white people carry around with us. We asked Gul-Gul if he would allow us to travel on foot with them for a few days. He looked a bit bewildered at the request, but finally shrugged

## *Walkabout*

and grinned wryly. I could see he thought we were like most white people—a little bit “all about up top”. However, he agreed, and soon we had set out on what proved to be a memorable adventure.

Slung on the strap of Charles' swag was an extra piece—the old billy-can. Inside the can I had packed some tea, sugar and salt. In our pockets we carried collapsible metal cups. We did not dare overload ourselves, as the heat and humidity were intense—and we did not want to spoil the experience by taking too many civilised aids..

Fortunately for us the aborigines like to take their time while on walkabout, and the Gul-Guls would call a halt almost anywhere, and for any excuse. Particularly if the piccanninies came upon a red lily lagoon—for these lilies have at the base of the flower a large pod filled with edible wild green peas. These can be dangerous to children if eaten raw and in large quantities, but we suffered no ill-effects from them when cooked.

At a beautiful spot which showed on our maps as Shady Camp, we frightened a huge crocodile that was snoozing in the mud. It turned and to our relief quickly submerged under the water. At a shallow pool with lilies Malbibi ground some lily pods up and cooked little cakes on the ashes. Piccannini Doll would help me collect armfuls of these lilies, pulling comically derisive little faces at me because, being afraid of crocodiles, I would not venture into the deeper portions of the lagoon. To wade about in the lagoon, I had to borrow a pair of old khaki shorts belonging to Charles—and my appearance made her laugh. She would point to my pale limbs and compare them to the pinkish legs of the native brolga bird.

We sat beside the lagoon, prodding and squeezing the little wild pea pods from the core of the lilies. I later boiled these in our billycan and combined them with the barramundi fish caught and prepared by Gul-Gul for our dinner. “You look,” he said, with the fixed glare of the slightly fanatical instructor. “Dis way I bin cookum all time—dis way my Farder bin cookum—his Farder cookum all same way.” He threw the large fish into the hot ashes of the fire, giving the fish a few turns by the tail, and finally taking a twig from the ground to remove the scales. Then on to the hot ashes again, with more hot ashes piled on top of the fish, as he continued his discourse on the cooking merits of his ancestors. It seemed no time before Mickie had lifted the

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cooked barramundi from the ashes and placed it on a piece of clean paperbark from the paperbark tree. The barramundi is at all times a supreme fish, but when cooked this way on the ashes and retaining all its natural sweet flavour, it really is *haute cuisine*.

It was really something to watch Gul-Gul spearing the huge barramundi—wading through the lagoons, spear poised ready to strike—which he would do like a flash of lightning if he sighted one; at the same time looking keenly about for the slightest movement of a crocodile.

I also watched, holding my breath, as the water rippled ominously or a blunt snag of wood showed itself, so like the dreaded grey snout. I felt relieved that there were some swamp trees about that Gul-Gul could spring up into if necessary. He would often use the branches of these trees as sighting platforms—moving along them with perfect balance, the water running from his body and giving him the appearance of a sleek black panther.

On the days that we made camp early, Gul-Gul would erect a little gunyah for his family. He would strip the paperbark tree, taking the large layers of soft bark to cover the framework of the gunyah. These layers of bark made it quite waterproof. The framework is made with poles, of soft pliable bamboo laced together with strands from the trailing vine tree. The gunyah at its highest point was only about five feet, but the Gul-Guls would curl up in it together. When the mosquitoes were troublesome, the family would sleep around their fire, placing now and then a few green branches over the fire to smoke some of the pests away.

Although Gul-Gul offered to build a gunyah for us to sleep in, Charles and I preferred the open—we loved to see the stars overhead. Nowhere in the world have stars seemed so bright, as in the Territory. They were crystal sharp, as though a giant hand had scrubbed the face of the sky. Gul-Gul said that we slept “all about”—he meant, I suppose with the world all about us. Certainly it felt like that to us. It was a big world—a world of space, and at times of great loneliness.

We would always be careful not to set our beds too close to the edge of the lagoons or swamps, remembering an earlier visit to the flood plains when we were not so aware of its pitfalls. On this occasion we were rugged down for the night, and enjoying the rest after a tough



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day of buffalo chasing and crashing across the plains. The quiet was rudely disturbed by one of our native boys, who came breathlessly into camp urgently requesting the use of one of the rifles. "Big fellah crocodile, all same close in," he informed us. Charles snatched a rifle, at the same time throwing one to Sandy. There was a crocodile there alright and as Sandy said, "all same, close in". It was too close in for me, and it managed to climb half-way up the bank before they killed it, with two shots between the eyes. We tied it to the jeep and hauled it up on to dry ground. It measured just under eighteen feet long. Sandy was highly delighted when told he could keep the skin—which he would trade to the white hunters for flour and sugar, tobacco and treacle. Its skin might end up in London or Paris, converted into luxury handbags or shoes. But it made me shudder. I can never wear anything made from the skin of any reptile. In my mind's eye, I always see them in action, and my heart has pounded too often to the sinister movement of a slimy back slipping swiftly across my path through the dry grass; or to the ominous squelch of their heavy bodies passing through the mangrove swamps at night.

On occasions when our three men were away hunting for food, I would sit beside Malbibi Gul-Gul's fire and learn from her many things concerning her tribal way of life—sometimes stories of her "dream-time" (her spirit world). Malbibi would then speak in soft modulated tones, with a voice like liquid honey. It had depth, softness, and an intimate quality that held the listener entranced.

She would forget me completely at times and speak as if to herself—or her children-to-be. She would speak of the "Great Mother" of all the world—of how she once came down from the sky to scatter her seed of creation over the face of the earth. Then in a hushed voice she would tell of the "Rainbow Serpent" of their mythology. This serpent, Malbibi said, would destroy a lubra's unborn child, should the lubra go into certain water-holes without first taking the precaution of encasing her body in a thick layer of mud.

When I questioned Malbibi, she admitted that birth control was practised fairly frequently in some of the tribes. It was the law of survival, she tried to explain. "When country can give no more tucker (food), one piccannini live maybe, but two or three die." The method of birth control varied from herbs to blackfellow magic.

## *Walkabout*

The life of an Australian aborigine woman is harsh and unrelenting. She is often betrothed at birth, sometimes to a man forty or fifty years older than herself. This means that as soon as she "crosses the river" from childhood to girlhood, she becomes the wife of a man of fifty-five or perhaps even seventy. This is not always the case, but happens quite often. Only a few weeks before joining the Gul-Guls, I had witnessed it myself.

Charles and I had been visiting a native compound, and were just finishing lunch with the superintendent and his wife when a terrific din broke out in the yard. We all rushed out to discover the cause. Dogs were barking, native women were yelling and gesticulating. The native men were hitting out hard at their lubras in an effort to quieten them. The two central figures in the domestic earthquake were a young native girl of about fourteen, and a wild cadaverous-looking man of about fifty or more. He had the girl by the arm and neck, and was trying to drag her, screaming, kicking and scratching as she was, from the compound. The mother was, of course, on the daughter's side—the rest were fairly evenly divided.

Our host tried to get some sanity into the *mêlée*—and when at last he could make himself heard, asked the cause of the trouble. It appeared that the girl had been betrothed at birth to the native. He had returned to the compound to find that she was now of a marriageable state and so wished to claim her. Never having ever seen her destined future mate, the little lubra had fastened her affections upon a handsome young buck of her own age group, and resented the desire of the cadaverous older man to take her outbush to "sit down along his fireplace two-fellah way". I felt sorry for the young lubra, who was little more than a child. She was terribly afraid and crying bitterly.

"Can't you do something?" I entreated our host. He explained the difficulty of interfering with tribal custom, but nevertheless, said that he would try. A big "talkabout" started between our host and the cadaverous native; our host arguing the youth of the girl and the fact that the man had not "lived alonga the tribe" to keep track of his future bride or her affections. The tall native continued to yell his demands and claims, at the same time keeping a stranglehold upon the little native girl. "She bin my roan one, proper fellah," he yelled wildly.

## *Walkabout*

"I bin pay two wild pigs for this one—two proper fellah good pigs—she belonga me now, proper fellah, ain't it?"

The argument might have lasted till eternity if our host had not offered three picked and much-prized goats from his herd as repayment with interest, and a suggestion that the disappointed groom try his luck with one Molly Hairpin, a widow of the tribe, and a first-class cook and huntress. Our good host clinched the bargain by throwing in a cigarette lighter, and love's dream was saved.

On a cattle station not many miles from this compound, I witnessed for the first time the "girl into woman" initiation. The little native girl was isolated and living out her month of tribal instruction, in a small corrugated iron shanty. At the time of our visit the heat was about one hundred and fourteen in the shade. The shanty was like a stifling furnace. On the dirt floor, and covered with an old hessian sack, I found the young girl. Perspiration trickled dismally down her pinched little face. Her eyes were bloodshot and strained.

An old native hag was seated on the ground beside the girl. This was the girl's instructress. For twenty-eight days this old native woman would come constantly to pound the "women laws" of the tribe into the mind of the girl. For after this month the girl would be ready for marriage, and must know all that was expected of her as a wife and mother. Only bread and water was allowed. Whether this diet was continued right through the month, I am not quite sure—certainly the girl looked as if this was the case, for she was just a pathetic little bag of bones.

In pidgin English, and with the help of a little "finger talk" I learned that the girl had "crossed the river". She must now fast for a month so that her mind would be sharper to absorb knowledge. At the end of the month she would be scrubbed with the warm ash from the fire, then sent to the river to wash away the ash. She was then a young woman and ready to be claimed as a wife by whoever she had been allotted to, or whoever was chosen by the tribe as the "right skin" for her.

If the girl-child was fortunate, and the chosen mate a young buck, he might be given to a little romanticism. In that case he would surreptitiously transfer a long piece of string from the girl's family fireplace to his own—and at night he would "sing" to the girl. This

### *Walkàbout*

consisted of a strange type of love chant, into which the girl's name was constantly woven. In some tribes a mock battle is waged—the bride's family pretending to oppose the would-be bridegroom—and the girl struggling and fighting with a great show of histrionics, to be finally overcome by the powers of her future husband and carried off to "sit along him camp-fire and share him blanket, two-fellah way."

Then life takes over for the little lubra, with the usual grind of nomad existence; falling behind for an hour or two to have her baby behind a rock or piece of scrub—then placing it in a wooden coolamon (a scooped-out piece of wood) and trudging dutifully on to rejoin her family at sundown.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### *Coming of the Wet*

ALL about us the land had become hungry. Moving across the wide plains seeking out new swamps and billabongs with bird life; following the tracks that led to buffalo herds and studying the ways of the strolling Gul-Guls, we had hardly noticed the gradual drying of the swamps.

It came as a shock, on retracing our steps to Soda Creek with the Gul-Guls to find that swamps we had rounded, just three weeks before, were nothing *now* but dwindling bogs. This last sudden phase in the dying of the swamps is the most dramatic phenomena we have experienced. Everywhere the water had been receding from us quietly and whole areas of the land had changed character, now it was harsh and cruel.

The stench of the dead and dying swamplands was everywhere, and very little wind stirred now to dissipate the smells. It had of course been slowly happening ever since we were with the men of Marrakai. The clear blue skies of August had given over to the beautifully cloud-fleeced and speckled skies of September, by mid-October the whole sky became scummed with cloud. Each morning this thickened and came closer to earth, to hold our whole world under a low ceiling. The heat was then unbearable.

We moved very slowly back to Soda Creek, walking only in the early morning and late afternoon—camping through the long middle of the day under the heavy shade trees which bounded every dying swamp—rolling out our swags and putting up our mosquito nets with the very death of each day.

The white cranes and egrets were leaving us; every evening we saw them sweeping away across the sky. Mickie Gul-Gul pointed his long hunting spear in the direction of the sea. "All them birds—him all go now—they fly back over sea—him no more now till next time."

## *Walkabout*

"Where you reckon they go?" I asked of Mickie. "Him go long way back dreamtime." To Mickie of course that was heaven. The big migration had started and the birds that had flown to us from Malaya and Indonesia were returning home. No doubt their noisy activity about the dwindling waters during the last two weeks was really the stress of their planning for the long night flights back to Malaya.

Our own Australian birds stayed on and cormorants from the sea battled with the shags and black ducks to share the spoils of the dying swamps. They feasted on the lifeless fish, ill and swollen with the mud of the shallow waters, the colonies of mussels lying rotting in the sun, and the snakes and lizards, mud-caked and blistered, crawling away to the shades.

This ebb-tide period at the end of the dry until the coming of the wet, anything from six weeks to three months, is dreaded in the far north of Australia. It is the period of worst heat and pestilence, and the terrible waiting for the rains to come when all life seems to come to an end and death catches up with so much that is still existing. For the few whites the life-rhythm is dangerously slowed down under a heavy bromide of heat from oppressive skies. Those who can will leave the country for the south—and many who stay and hang on become mentally ill.

We ourselves, crawling back to the trees of Shady Camp to rest for a day, found our strength suddenly ebbing. At least there was shade here, but no longer the beautiful pool we had known with the reflections. It was now just a bog. Mickie had found three tortoises slowly crawling their way from the Shady Camp pool to the next water-hole, which lay out on the open plain about three hundred yards away. He killed and unshelled them and tossed them in the ashes to cook. When they were cooked to his satisfaction, he gave the biggest of the three to us and I cut up this mass which looked like the sprawling body of a small octopus, and Elsa curried it along with some hard-boiled ducks' eggs. Harry filmed the whole process of the cooking.

While Elsa was preparing the tortoise for the curry under the perturbed gaze of little Mickie, who couldn't understand why we wanted to "mess his cooking all about", Elsa asked him a very pertinent question. "Hey! Mickie, you remember that big fellow crocodile we see when we boil billy and eat fish here some time back?" "Yes,







## *Coming of the Wet*

Missus." "Well, where him go now that water-hole all dry up—him no more about, is he?" Mickie pointed to the big water-hole on the plain. "Him gone over to big water now, Missus."

I had never given another thought to that crocodile. No doubt I would have thought of him after dark, and there was eighteen feet of him, if ever I was judge of the size of a crocodile. Elsa wasn't satisfied, so Mickie said: "You come, Missus, I show you," and we both followed Mickie Gul-Gul as he circled the bog at Shady Camp.

On the other side of the pool we found the unmistakable "drag track" of the big crocodile where it had made its exit from the dying swamp, and there was another track right beside it. When we camped there three weeks previously we little realised that there were two great monster crocodiles at large in the beautiful pool. That afternoon as we slept, stretched full length on the floor of large dead leaves which had piled up through the years beneath the great shade trees, we were awakened by the noise of leaves rustling and a peculiar sound just like the hissing of steam. Then a blood-curdling yell from little Nipper Gul-Gul brought us all to our feet.

A three-pronged fishing spear flashed right between Elsa and myself, and pinned a long, writhing, hissing, fighting taipan to the ground. It was looking for trouble when Nipper saw it, and Mickie with his spear always ready had speared and pinned it to the ground from a distance of about forty feet.

But the spear didn't hold the world's most venomous snake for long. Mickie had pinned it at a spot about eight inches below the head, and its ugly flat head had just enough play to turn and fasten its teeth into the wood of Mickie's spear. Then every muscle in its eight feet of shining brown body, muddied by the water of the bog, wrapped the taipan around the spear, and pulling the spear from the ground the whole mass of snake and spear became a lashing, thrashing fury. The leaves flew in all directions as the taipan first bit the spear, then itself. It lashed the air in frenzy with its whiplike fangs.

Little Nardoo and Nipper rushed to Malbibibi and clung to her naked thighs. Nothing the snake could do could free it from the prongs of Gul-Gul's spear, now protruding for at least an inch through its body. The deadly venom from the taipan's poison ducts ran down the spear. It lashed an area under the trees of about fifteen square feet, until

## *Walkabout*

Mickie Gul-Gul finally flattened its head and threw the body into the coals of his fire.

The striking power of the taipan made it obvious to us that we would have to strengthen the sides of our mosquito nets covering us at night, and take them out as far from our faces as possible.

Fortunately on these still, sleepless nights, nothing could come to us across those dried, rustling leaves without warning us, and on these nights the Chauvel camp and the Gul-Gul camp came closer together.

Farther back on the great grass plains, towards the Mary River and verging eastwards towards the south Alligator River, the blacks were firing the dry country to clear the dead growth of bamboos and grasses for the coming of the wet and its voluptuous aftermath, when the whole world would have new growth and meaning. The smoke of a hundred bush fires from fifteen thousand square miles of flood plain rose, only to meet the low ceiling of cloud, which draped itself like a pall across the land.

The cruel sun sank in the afternoons like a swollen and burnished globe of blood red—burnished by the brown of the bush-fire haze.

The mosquitoes came to us at Shady Camp, just as they had done on the river. As the sun sank they droned upon us in a great swarm. Buffaloes had used Shady Camp very often, so we collected and built and set fire to mounds of heaped dung. Within the circle of those odiferous fumes we ate our hot curried turtle, with a full issue of salt tablets, and drank our billy tea.

Then washing our faces and hands in the precious little muddy water from our water-bags, and taking off our clothes, we flung ourselves under our mosquito nets.

Day and night meant little change. We often felt a breeze and suffered less through the heat of the day than through the heat of the night—the endless nights. I felt sorry for Elsa. In vain she had searched along the billabongs with Malbibí for a water-hole, large and clear enough in which to have a dip.

We lay perspiring under our nets. Everything was still except for the monotonous drone of the mosquitoes, now thickly clustered over our nets, and the occasional explosion of marsh gas igniting within the wood of our small camp-fires.

Both the Gul-Gul children cried and whimpered unhappily, and

## *Coming of the Wet*

Mickie droned his prayers in what sounded like a strange Arabic, very late into the night. We listened to the unearthly screech of the barking-owl sounding monotonously from across the bogs. Elsa stretched a hand across to me, covered in mosquito net. "I don't think I can stand much more of this," she said.

"You won't have to, dear," I replied, trying to comfort her as well as I could. "We'll be at Soda Creek tomorrow night, at least there's a tank there and you can have a bucket wash. Then we'll pack and pull out of the country." I felt horribly exhausted myself and uncomfortably guilty for having brought Elsa out into these flood plains, so late in the year.

"The cruel part about all this is that we can't photograph it," Elsa said, as much to herself as to me—"all this heat and discomfort and exhaustion, nobody will ever know what we've been through."

Long flashes of sheet lightning lit the sky—a further warning that we should be leaving the flood plains. A chunk of wood burned through in our camp-fire, causing a whole castle of glowing coals to fall. Somewhere towards morning we fell asleep.

We folded our mosquito nets and rolled our swags in the clammy chill of the following dawn.

We had a quick breakfast of billy tea and damper and marmalade. The Gul-Guls re-heated the already partly grilled shank bones of what was left of portions of a wallaby that Malbibí had carried wrapped in paperbark. The smell of meat grilling over the Gul-Gul's fire was most appetising, and they made a primitive scene as they sat about their fire, gnawing away at bones. They had consumed two tortoises the night before.

Little Nardoo was being fed by Malbibí, who ripped pieces of hot meat in strands away from the long shank. But Nardoo wasn't satisfied. She pushed her mother's hand away and snatched for a bone in the hot ashes of the fire. Then burning her fingers she burst into wild weeping and howling.

In a torrent of aborigine curses and howls from the children, the Gul-Gul camp broke up. With his bare feet Gul-Gul spread the fire and tramped the hot ashes into the dust of the plain; then taking his long hunting spears he led the way out on to the plains from Shady Camp.

## *Walkabout*

He led us very well that day, keeping us off the exposed plains as much as possible, to follow the fringe of the bogs so that we could walk under lines of shade trees.

For lunch we threw mussels on the fire at a dead water-hole. They were coarse but palatable, when sprinkled with vinegar, and we washed them down with billy tea and damper.

I don't know what kind of a tree it was that we rested under that day. It might have been a tamarind—but it gave a tremendous shade, and as the smoke from the bush fires had covered the sun, some of the fierceness had gone from the day.

We fell asleep in the heavy shade of the tree and stayed longer than we had planned, because we wanted to reach Soda Creek Camp before dark. We were awakened in a most undignified fashion by Mickie Gul-Gul digging each of us in the ribs with one of his hunting spears.

As we trudged through what was left of the afternoon, a suffocating humidity settled upon the land and the sun went down, as usual behind the burnishing pall of smoke. Both the senior Gul-Guls were carrying their children high on their shoulders. Little Nardoo had her bare feet and toes interlocked below her mother's chin. Malbibí was shining with sweat.

We often spat the sweat from our mouths as it ran in rivulets from our foreheads. We turned a corner strewn with iron-stone boulders at the end of a long-bog and saw lines of buffalo of all ages mixed up with wild horses streaking towards us across a long plain. There must have been at least a thousand buffalo heading our way.

We were glad to rest for a while although we knew we were at least five miles from Soda Creek and that we would be trudging to our base in the darkness. The sharp echo of rifle shots came to us piercing clear across the plain. Great lumbering buffaloes suddenly disappeared from the plains in whole lines, only to re-appear again just as suddenly. They had hit the open patches of bog or fallen and wallowed in the deep buffalo drains.

Hundreds of buffalo in the lead were now swiftly approaching our position. They buried themselves for seconds in the slime of bogs, and came lumbering towards us, soaking wet and gleaming silver, as they caught the glow of the setting sun. Floods of pelicans and geese rose

## *Coming of the Wet*

disturbed from the great plain and thousands of small wood-duck ascended from the last of the waters and swept noisily in dark clouds about the sky. Wild pigs in family groups came rushing and squealing out from the bogs before the charging buffalo.

We were busy getting our cameras ready and reading the light for exposure, when the first of the buffaloes charged towards us blindly. We knew that nothing could change their course, and owing to their natural short-sightedness and fear they would lumber right across our position and only the large rocks would give us protection; so we flung ourselves behind the biggest boulders and set the cameras to our shoulders for some of the best massed shots of buffalo we had ever secured.

This we knew would be the last shoot of the season. Death on the plains—suffering—carnage—great bloodied swollen carcasses of buffalo lying on the plains—being ripped to shreds by hawks and crows and dingoes.

Soon now the rains would be upon this land, and as the months of storm and rain advanced, all that would be left above water would be the highest scrublands—the highest trees and outcrops of rock like the one behind which we took refuge. The plains would be wiped clean again and waving grass hide the scars.

Suddenly the buffaloes were upon us. Sure of foot they clattered across the smaller rocks in their hundreds. They came within just a few feet of us. Not one of them seemed to look our way or falter in its headlong rush, and within a matter of minutes the plain was clear and a thousand or more buffalo had been swallowed by the scrubs to the back of us. Away in the distance we saw a man on a white horse moving across the plain and we knew that would be Yellow Charlie riding back over his kill.

The scrubs swallowed us as darkness set in and we left the last heat-blistered, shrunken bog with its split squares and crevices making abstract patterns in the mud. Although the ceiling of cloud was low upon the lands there was a luminous quality in the sky above the scrubs and without the slightest trace of a breeze this strange luminous quality of the night made the shadows within the scrub immobile and mysterious. Then we entered the area of the towering termite beds which fringe the plains of Soda Creek.

## *Walkabout*

The shapes of the termite beds were now grotesque and hideous. Mickie Gul-Gul and his family held back until in our fatigue we could catch up to them. His children were whimpering again and he and his Malbibí muttered to each other. It was plain that they didn't like this area.

These termite mounds were horribly sinister. The Madonna and her child and the saints, and the hooded women carrying wood which we had admired and wondered at in the hard defining daylight, now turned to Frankenstein figures—to hunchbacks—great swollen toads, standing on their hind legs, and hooded vampires. We passed between them; with Gul-Gul chanting to keep the evil spirits away and came out on the small plain at Soda Creek, which held our rusted, galvanised-iron depot.

The wretched, broken windmill was still struggling to turn in the slight breeze—its forward and backward creaking only adding to the desolation of the night. We passed close to its rusted tower, saw the trickle of water that ran idly from its iron tubing near the ground and knew that, as usual, not one drop of water was going into the rusted tank.

Ian, who had taken care of our depot and vehicles, had a small buffalo-dung fire burning at the end of the shed. He called to us and Mickie answered with a yakaai. We dumped our small swags and lay exhausted and oblivious to the mosquitoes which even swarmed through the pungent buffalo fumes. From sheer fatigue we slept, just as we were and with our boots on. Ian spread some mosquito nets above us.

At about eleven o'clock we awoke after a little more than two hours' sleep. It was still hot so I went down to the creaking windmill and filled some kerosene tins for Elsa to have a bucket shower under the tank stand. Harry and Ian built the fire and put the billies on.

About this time the mosquitoes were a little less troublesome and after bucket showers and the re-building of the buffalo fires, we quite enjoyed a meal of salmon kedgeriee and plenty of hot billy tea. Malbibí came over to our camp for a small bag of flour and by the time we had undressed and turned in under our mosquito nets to sleep again, the Gul-Guls were happily gorging themselves on Johnny cakes cooked in the coals, and thick treacle. They had quite a large fire,

### *Coming of the Wet*

which weirdly lit up the twisted shapes of the pandanus palms, under which they camped.

At this moment with sheet lightning in the sky, no place seemed so good as Soda Creek homestead, with its rusting iron shed and cement floor—its decrepit windmill which reluctantly pumped cool water up for us from the hot earth—and the closeness to the track which would lead us out from these flood plains.

The aerals of our transmitting radio, outlined against the night sky, told us that we would be in contact by voice with the outside world soon after dawn. The dark outlines of our vehicles, all well fitted for long stages in the wilderness gave us comfort. Our camp-fire died with the night and the last phase before dawn gave itself over to the mournful cry of the curlews and the creak of the broken windmill.

## *Flight Before the Storms*

SODA CREEK at dawn the following morning looked as dead and desolate as any portion of the land we had moved in, and life was just as unendurable. Although there was water in the half-moon swamp and thousands of whistling duck massed on the banks—the hardiest of trees and bushes were drooping to earth in their thirst for water.

The morning air was thick and even sticky with flying insects. There was something clammy and lifeless about this myriad of insects which settled on everything in search of sustenance. Some, full of venom, clung to us with the savagery of despair, stinging our faces and necks and arms—even stinging our ankles when they crawled helplessly to us from the ground.

Where did all these insects come from? Why were they here? "This mob, they come too quick," Mickie said. He tried to explain that sometimes they come ahead of the "wet", when nature should have timed their coming just after the first rains; when the dead plains, receiving their waters again became pregnant with life—grasses shooting up overnight, and insects in their millions coming to feed. But no creature, however large or small, or even man himself, can time the coming of the first storm to herald the wet season. I often think the ants know better than anyone, but we saw very few of them on the flood plains.

As the great swollen orb of the sun rose from behind the pandanus forest to the east, we had already had our breakfast, and packed a good deal of our heavy equipment away. Dark clouds were banking to the north and the west.

Yellow Charlie rode over from the buffalo camp to tell us we should hurry away from the flood plains, as the first storm would break at any moment.



## *Flight Before the Storms*

Seeing Elsa still packing in the shade of the shed, Charlie, as spick and span as ever, dismounted and leading his horse, went over to her. With a cavalier sweep of his broad-brimmed hat, he said: "Good morning, Missus, my boss would like you to come and have lunch with him, so you won't have to make tucker middle of day when packing up, and then I think Mr. Chauvel should keep you all travelling until you get to Marrakai homestead—we might get a storm tonight."

The aborigine telegraph had told them we were back at Soda Creek and their concern was for my brave little missus. There was nothing waiting in thought here. The Buffalo Boss and Yellow Charlie and his men, had made their last big buffalo drive on the terrible plains the night before and they had skinned beasts through most of that hot night and they themselves were busy breaking and packing their big buffalo camp. But they had still found time to think of us.

Over at their camp at Leichardt Point we sipped steaming hot black tea and ate damper and wild whistling duck roasted in the coals of an earth oven. The Buffalo Boss had his big camp packed aboard three blitz waggons. One waggon, with the Arab in charge, was already moving out of camp. In it were crates of pigs and on top of one of the crates Cleopatra rode, her feathers all dusty and puckered in the heat.

We ate our meal in the shade of the Buffalo Boss's large bedroom, with two lubras in clean print frocks waiting on our table, which consisted of two forty-four-gallon petrol drums, turned on end, with planks between.

In the background the other lubras were struggling to turn the great hides of the last kill. No doubt some aborigines would stay behind for a few days to cure these hides fit for packing.

After lunch, on the advice of the Buffalo Boss, we took our leave of them all—shaking hands with the Boss, Yellow Charlie, Mickie Gul-Gul (who had come with us), Nipper, Polly, Sarah, little Mariwan, Charcoal, Daylight, Toba, Kamutu and of course little Nardoo. She hung to Elsa's little finger as Elsa did the rounds of the girls.

"You come back some day, Missus?" asked Polly. "Maybe," Elsa replied; and Polly moved away with tears in her eyes. I took Mickie Gul-Gul's hand in mine, he knew how to shake hands and liked to show how he could do it. "Good-bye, little man," I said, "here's ten pounds for you" (I gave him clean new crinkling notes) "and Missus has left

## *Walkabout*

some sugar and tea and flour and tobacco with Malbibí". "Me thankem you, boss—you fellers come back some day?" he asked. "I think so, Mickie," I replied.

"Then I come big walkabout with you, boss—me and Malbibí and little fellahs—might bring my old Granmovver too—owie (yes)?"

"Now good-bye, ol' man," he said, as he shook my hand again. He always liked to call me ol' man. Malbibí was happy with a new dress Elsa had given her and little Nardoo was fighting with Nipper and little Mariwan for a bag of boiled lollies which long ago had become a molten mess.

A roll of thunder in the sky to the north brought the camp to its senses—even the tired dogs stirred and barked.

"All about, you fellows! All about!"

It was the Buffalo Boss shouting. He came to us with a present of fresh buffalo steaks and tongues for our big tucker box. We said good-bye to him and to Yellow Charlie and then we too, two Land Rovers strong with one Holden Utility, pulled out from Leichardt Point, pushing due west as hard and as fast as we could travel.

We travelled for twenty miles before we halted to boil the billy for our evening meal. A world of heavy cloud seemed to be closing in on us. At odd intervals long streaks of lightning circled the whole sky, low down on the horizon. The whole buffalo world of plain and scrub was silent. Insects swarmed about us—the heat was oppressive—all ominous signs. We each did little more than sip a cup of tea. Every minute was valuable now. We must reach Marrakai, where at least we would have a roof over our heads.

As we drove the next few miles into the sunset we wound in and out of pandanus thickets and broken gullies—death traps in flood time. The darkness set in—suddenly—like it does in this north land. Away on the horizon towards Marrakai sheet lightning flashed constantly. On the plains we gathered way—we were even able to travel up to thirty miles an hour, all the time keeping our searchlights moving to pick out the track.

Dark masses of sleeping buffalo loomed up like mountains of earth. They generally took flight well ahead of us, but often they would turn to look at our vehicles and become dazzled with our headlights. Gradually the stars were veiled—the night blackened. Flashes of more

## *Flight Before the Storms*

fierce and vivid lightning gave us quick glimpses of a whole world of pandanus palms and fields of mammoth ant hills, and charging hordes of buffalo. We were forced to come down to ten miles an hour—to growl and lumber in and out of the wallows and small gullies of white dust.

The circle of sheet lightning gave us a frightening image of storm graven upon the night sky, with masses of mountainous cloud. The lightning and a burst of thunder coming together startled a mob of brumbies. They galloped madly somewhere parallel to us. We heard the crashing of rotten trees as they were trampled by the frightened horses—the clatter of their hooves on the hard ground. They seemed to be bearing down on us, neighing loudly. I tried to turn my searchlight round but a rough jolt threw me from the wheel. As Elsa was hurled across me, she took the wheel and swung it madly as a flash of lightning showed the brumbies racing to us.

We stopped the car to let them gallop out of our way. Then for a split second the whole sky became lit with a livid greenish glow. We had seen this effect before cyclones and it was terrifying. Under great masses and arches and deep depths of cloud we waited while the horses passed. Harry pulled one of the Rovers up beside our car and Ian lumbered up behind.

Generally the first great storm of the "wet" is dry, but it is generally preceded by a tornado of wind blowing the dead fruits of the dry season—the last of the grasses, dry twigs, branches and leaves into one maddening maelstrom, and just for a few brief minutes covering the whole world in dust. We knew if as much as half an inch of rain fell where we were just then, we would perhaps be bogged down for a week or more.

Lightning showed us the plain clear of buffaloes and horses, so we put our vehicle into gear and forged ahead. We only had six miles to go to Marrakai homestead. It would probably be deserted now that the buffalo leases had not been resumed, but it would be a refuge from the storm.

Then suddenly like a whiplash, what we had hoped for came to us. An onslaught of terrific wind hit us and a debris of rubbish from the dead plains swept over us; leaves and dust clogged the windscreen, but we kept moving. We prayed that it wouldn't rain. Then it was quiet

## *Walkabout*

and some spots of rain fell. It was ominous again. A streak of lightning blinded us both and the thunder clapped down to shake the whole earth and our car. Deafened and blinded only for seconds, we groped our way along, ploughing into a sea of dust which now formed the wide road into Marrakai.

Another long sustained flash of lightning showed us the fence and open gateway into the homestead paddock, but here the wheel tracks were deeply grooved and I had to crawl to allow the headlights to keep me well on the track. The wind again—and this time rain—sweeping, lashing rain, but we were safe. If we were stuck we knew now we could walk to the homestead. The land was so dry that it gulped the first water to fall, and the bed of the wheel ruts so hard that the water turned them into streams. The rain had washed our headlights clean and we could see much better. I left the grooves, or the grooves left me, and I was slithering “all about” as Gul-Gul would have said.

We wondered if the storm had hit our little family of Gul-Guls, and whether the buffalo hunters and all their aborigine followers had safely left Leichardt Point.

Our car spun round, waltzing on the surface of the plain, and our headlights showed Harry desperately trying to avoid colliding with us. Like drunken fools, with the rain and wind still tearing at us, we slithered and turned, and swung down upon the outhouses of Marrakai. All about everything was wrecked. Large sheets of paperbark had been ripped from the outside “sleep-out” and dogs, hens and goats were all herded together in the long open vehicle shed.

We pulled up here and wrapping our oilskins about us, and leaving our headlights on to light our way, we beat against the rain and wind right past the pitiful scene of the backyard animals, as they leapt together, now more frightened at our approach, yelping, bleating, butting and kicking with horns and hooves—all fighting for shelter. Struggling with swags we battled to the shelter of the iron verandah.

We shouted and knocked on the iron walls, but nobody answered. Vivid lightning lit the homestead and with those flashes we saw the barred doors; the idly swinging windows of galvanised iron and the wreckage that was all about the place. We struggled with doors and windows as the wind and rain lashed us and at last found our way into

## *Flight Before the Storms*

two of the rooms. There were cyclone wire stretchers and washstands in the rooms and one large double bed was still made up, and there was evidence that somebody had been sleeping there.

Harry and Ian took one room and Elsa and I the other. We opened our swags and made up our beds. We slept through the wild artillery of that night, deep inside the galvanised-iron walls of Marrakai. The skies of the immense Northern Territory had opened upon us, and the thirsting earth was drinking at last.

Next morning the world was fresh and gay with deep blue sky and swiftly fleeting cloud. A cold wind blew from across the long flat land, now soaked with water. The cold was really comparative as we had dropped some degrees from the terrible temperatures which soared constantly over the one hundred mark, and now in the place of stillness came the hard-blowing cooler winds, which in the "wet" always followed the storms. We managed to open the door to the kitchen and found enough dry wood to light the stove. I had unloaded some of our personal luggage from one of the vehicles, and Elsa greeted us looking almost as elegant as a housewife from *Vogue*.

With blankets wrapped about us, we all huddled near the fire in the Marrakai kitchen, devouring buffalo steak and onions. The morning was a happy relief from suffering and we were gay. We had experienced the very first storm of the "wet" and according to rule there would at least be some days' respite and possibly even some weeks before the next and heavier storms set in. We could also look forward to a day or so of cool weather before the dreadful heat returned.

So we stayed on in what was left of the old Marrakai—full of memories for Elsa and me. We were all able to wash and tidy up our clothes and rest and enjoy good meals—but the deserted Marrakai was tragically lonely and it voiced the very personal frustration which has been so much a part of "the Territory" ever since the first white men came to it with their cattle.

We thought of the work over the long tough years that both Roy Williams and Mrs. Williams had done to such good effect here. Roy took over a shell of a place on this cruel hillside, with no proper water supply or amenities and he and his wife with their bare hands and the help of aborigine labour, brought order and tidiness—then comfort and even beauty to Marrakai.

## *Walkabout*

The coloured tables and chairs—the great pots of beautiful crotons and ponderosas—the flowering tropical shrubs—the wood orchids and swinging baskets of ferns had all gone—the swinging hammocks with their snow-white mosquito nets had gone too, and already the first storm had started upon the work of final destruction.

Half the roof from one "sleep out" was lying about the bare hill, and the children's "sleep out" and playground was already falling in. A tawny-haired doll lay in the dust. The pet jabirus who strolled the pretty homestead garden like policemen on the beat, were no more. Gone were all the happy station aborigines and the laughing, chattering house-girls.

All the deep affection of a lonely woman for her home, and all her labours to bring a touch of civilisation to a bleak world; all the years of longing and planning and working, and all the love and affection given and now wasted. That was Marrakai as we saw it for the last time. Only the curlews came as they had always come—to advance up the cruel hill to the homestead, crying in those early hours which bring the dawn. Only Marrakai Alec, the aborigine shooter, looking at us across the broken garden fence. He and a few remnants of older natives still clung to their camping ground on Marrakai Creek. He asked sadly for some tobacco, tea and sugar. He had been a buffalo shooter for the white men all his life. He had lost the art of hunting as the bush aborigines do, and now there was nobody at Marrakai to give him rations. He could move to an Aborigine Compound or Settlement if he found life too hard. He faced a difficult adjustment after his life of adventure on the wide, free flood plains.

On the third day the wind ceased and the sun struck down again, and on the fourth we were glad to move from Marrakai. We left Marrakai Alec with flour, sugar, tea and tobacco, and our vehicles lumbered away through the white sands of Marrakai Creek and out on to the white bull-dust flats. Already the ground was powdery again, and odd bursts of head winds swept the fine dust about our vehicles, enveloping us in a permanent cloud. Anybody could have seen us coming for miles.

About midday we lunched in the shade of immense overhanging paperbark trees which lined the banks of the dry Margaret River.

### *Flight Before the Storms*

Evidently the storm had been localised to the flood plains and to other areas out to sea, so that we could expect to reach the tarmac highway without worry.

We would be glad to see the Highway and set our sails for the eight hundred miles run to Alice Springs—then the Ghan Railway, and our last one thousand miles of motoring to reach our homes in Sydney.

Before we reached the tarmac, the waters of the last billabong in the buffalo world turned blood-red as the sun went down; the red glow sweeping right from the foot of the sun across the still waters. Wild geese with their necks outstretched, moved like ink-black bats across the red sunset.

The following day as we travelled down the long, long highway, the sky was clouded and the air heavy with thunder. The storms were closing in upon the world once again. Soon the wild world of the buffalo would be awash with the first storm and the great herds would be moving into the dense scrublands to lie in and breed. The next day rain was falling behind us, and as we left Tennants Creek, they told us that heavy rain was falling behind us at Katherine and at Mataranka.

The "wet" was already closing in. When we reached Alice Springs we were told that it had been raining in the country to the south through which the railway ran.

We looked out from the windows of the Ghan train upon plateaux and plains clothed in wild flowers, the wild jasmine, the blood-red hops and the acres of that scarlet flower, the most beautiful of all wild and primitive blooms, the Sturt desert pea.

All the beauty of a foetid hothouse lay upon the land, now watered by warm showers. As we halted at the little signal stops with nothing now but exotic distances to hem us in, the heat of mid-summer, almost unbearable, beat down upon the whole train. A small, hot breeze carried the sensual fragrance of the aromatic herbs and wild flowers, and the hot wooden carriages filled with fleeting, enervating odours from a land of beauty people call a desert.

Outside the carriages swarms of sticky, small black flies rose from everything.

Australia is a land of great contrasts. The country that was barren of flowers and dry almost to a dust bowl when we chased about over

## *Walkabout*

the Ghan with our cameras on our journey, up to the Territory, was now clothed in a splendour of grass and wild flowers—even the hungry mulga trees were in bloom.

A cloud of bright yellow butterflies swept right across the Ghan as we pulled away from an outpost called Rodinga. Up in the far north-land from which we had hurried the heavier rains had fallen. Swamps were filling again and the great dry rivers were filled and bursting their banks. Along the flat, dead coastline of the flood plains the big tides of the sea had pressed in to do battle with the flooding of the rivers.

That was all a thousand miles away, and more each moment as we swung through the beautiful deserts on the Central Railway on our way once again to the Port of Camels.

At Port Augusta we unloaded ourselves and our bleached and dusty vehicles. We were just as worn, but Port Augusta was used to tired, travel-stained craft and people, and the remnants of smashed expeditions stumbling into port from either the deserts or the sea.

It was just one week since we had left the Boss Buffalo man and Yellow Charlie and the Gul-Guls away up on the flat and lonely rim of Australia. Now we were two thousand miles away, and heading for Sydney and home, which lay a thousand miles ahead of us. We were longing for a sight of the sparkling harbour, with our house high above it, and meeting Sue again. The muddy billabong was far away.

But we could never forget those people of the outposts—the few who hold our vast land together. I hope we are wiser for having shared, even briefly, in their lives.

We had taken time off to look closely at a great continent, to live simply as best we could. Back home it will seem like fantasy; Lake Eyre, the mirages, the outback homesteads, the buffalo hunts, the sweltering river trip. . . . But with our films we should be able to convince ourselves that it all happened. That wonderfully exciting country and those grand people are really there. Perhaps it will do the same for you, too.